Golden lines

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by Elboron

Summary

Some small differences from canon. Slow burn.

Chapter 1

With a loud whistle the train started moving. Another year at Hogwarts was starting. And Madison Stewart was excited. Against all reason and common sense. After all, her previous years at the school were not strictly typical. Although filled with lessons and homework, detention and house points, her school years were also full of dangerous creatures, life and death situations, longing and confusion. Unfortunately not the “I-can’t-get-this-potion-right” sort of confusion either.

Madison Stewart was on a mission. To find her brother had been her one goal when first starting at Hogwarts. This goal had brought her face to face with redcappas, acromantulas, curses and death-threats. Any other teenager would count the days until school year ended when faced with that kind of pressure. But Madison was nothing if not determined. Her brother meant everything to her. How could he not – among death eaters, pureblood fanatics and all around self obsessed narcissists, Jacob was the only family-member to pay any attention to Madison growing up. He talked to her and played with her when they were younger and sent her long letters after he went to school. Madison still remembered the hollow sensation when her brother went to Hogwarts. The house seemed empty and Madisons insides seemed empty. The hollow feeling had only increased when she learned her brother had gone missing. It seemed to stick with Madison where ever she went – the emptiness, the numb indifference to everything and everyone except Jacob.

But then, she had gotten in to Hogwarts. And things started to change. The hollowness in her started to diminish, being replaced with decisiveness, resolution and optimism. At first she thought it was because she was actually doing something to search for her missing brother. Or maybe it was because she was closer to the last place Jacob lived. After 3 years she knew better. The change had come because for the first time in her life Madison had friends. She, who had only ever confided in Jacob, had only cared for Jacob, had actual friends. Rowan was the first one she made. They met in Diagon Alley and had been best friends ever since. Now Madison could not imagine her life without the dark haired book-worm who shared her dorm room and deepest secrets. As time went by, Madison had made more friends. All different in their background and nature, but all of them as close to Madisons heart as Jacob was. And they were the true reason the hollowness was gone. Her insides were not empty anymore,

the were full of love. Love for her brother yes, but also love for her friends. How did she manage to be so lucky as to find people, that didn't mind, that her parents were Voldemorts followers. Didn't even mind, that she had an infamous brother and she herself was declared "cursed" the moment she stepped into Hogwarts in her first year. Lucky, that's what she was. And that's how she felt when she laughed and talked to her friends during the train ride.

The buzzing in the hall was almost deafening. All the students who had missed each other in the train were catching up, first-years were oohing and aahing at everything they saw, ghosts were gliding through people and Peeves was flying around holding someones toad.

"Madison!" someone yelled. She looked around. Penny Haywood was pressing her way through people to get to the Gryffindor table.

"Hey Penny! I missed you in the train. How are you?"

"I was at the prefects compartment. I'm fine. I missed you! How was your summer?"

"Fine, nothing special. Could not wait to get back here actually. Wait..prefects compartment? You're a prefect? Oh Penny, that's wonderful, congratulations!"

"Thanks!" said Penny beaming with pride.

"A prefect ey? Thats splendid, now we have one in our corner when we have some leftover dungbombs to move around" said Tonks grinning with glee.

"I dont want to have anything to do with dungbombs, thank you very much." said Penny smiling sternly.

"Oh you wont, don't worry." said Tonks innocently.

"I really missed you Madison" said Penny sitting down next to her.

"Me too Penny, I'm glad to be back here with you all again."

Penny Haywood. The blond haired hufflepuff was one of Madisons closest friends. She seemed to be Helga Hufflepuffs reincarnation – sweet and kind to everyone she met. Fiercely loyal to her friends and one of the smartest witch in her year. When thinking about Penny,

Madison found, that she felt especially lucky.

“I hope this year will be a bit ..er..more normal than last one.” said Penny slowly. “My little sister Beatrice started Hogwarts this year, I wouldn’t want her to see all the things we saw last year.”

“Aww, don’t mollycoddle the kid Penny. Where’s the fun without some imminent death omen hanging over you. The kid has to toughen up, doesn’t she?” said Tonks only half jokingly.

“You wouldn’t say that if it was your sister now would you?” asked Penny amused.

“Cant say. Only child speaking” answered Tonks.

“Well I’m with Penny. I hope the only thing I have to worry about this year is whether it will be Snape who poisons me or Kettleburn who maims me. That’s enough to be going on with” said Madison.

Penny looked at Madison curiously. “Does that mean you won’t search for the next vault this year?”

Madison sighed. Searching for the vaults had been the only link to finding her brother. But the deeper she delved into the mysteries concerning Jacob and the cursed vaults, the further she seemed from answers.

“I don’t know. It seams that the more I search, the more trouble I find. Last year was crazy, I don’t want to bring that kind of danger to the school, or to you guys.” Madison sagged a little. As much as she longed for a normal school year, she felt as if she was betraying her brother by giving up. Penny seemed to understand her.

“Listen Madison. As I said last year – you didn’t ‘bring trouble’ to us. Trouble was here to begin with. And if its gone now, its only thanks to you. But no one can blame you for wanting to live your life like a normal student, without all the drama. Cheer up, its going to be an awesome year!”

“Speak for yourself. If there wont be any drama, whats the point in going to classes at all? I have to find Tulip and see hows her stock of fanged frisbees holding up. If drama wont come to me, well then...” grinned Tonks and went looking for Tulip.

Penny looked after her apprehensively. “You are not on duty yet prefect, don’t worry.” smiled Madison. “Right. But I’m going to have

my hands full with these two this year, wont I?" asked Penny.

"Oh, no doubt about it. Be prepared...and carry an air freshener for the dungbombs."

"I will. Have to run, the headboy and girl are supposed to give us instructions soon. Bye Madison, I'll see you in class." Penny stood and headed towards the main door where there seemed to be a little group gathering.

Madison sighed again. No one could blame her..that's were Penny was wrong. There were people who could blame her for giving up on Jacob. Madisons parents talked about nothing else than Jacob. He was there firstborn after all. The pride and joy of the Steward family. Ever since he went missing Madisons parents could not wait until she too left for Hogwarts. She had become a tool in her parents disposal to finding Jacob. What would they say if they knew, that the only thing Madison wanted to do was to study and play quidditch.

Rowan was already at the dormitory when Madison arrived. "Hey! Where were you for so long. I already unpacked my stuff."

"I was at the hall, enjoyed the feast. Didn't you?"

"Not everyone wants to eat two helpings of shepherds pie on top of pot roast. How you don't weigh a ton is beyond me."

"I well...I..was hungry." Madison felt uncomfortable. Rowan looked at her sharply "They are feeding you at home right?" "Of course they are." said Madison quickly. A little too quickly it seemed, because Rowan exhaled deeply and murmured "oh Madison, I'm sorry. I thought they would be better this summer".

"Its just..they just forget sometimes. They go out a lot and they forget when they come home. And I don't want to remind them, because I don't want to talk to them anyways. And I can't use magic and...its nothing, I'm fine. Its not a big deal." Madison felt herself become red and started to busy herself with her trunk.

"What classes do you have tomorrow?" she asked to try and divert the conversation topic. Rowan was silently looking at her for a few moments, but then seamed to decide to not push it further. "Potions and transfiguration first. Same as you I think."

Madison unpacked her trunk and fell into her bed. It had been a long day and she was drained. She hadn't talked or eaten as much for the whole summer as she had with her friends in the train and at the feast.

"Did you see Penny? I didn't find her at the train." asked Rowan who was also in her bed and fixing her curtains.

"Yeah, I saw her at the hall. Shes a prefect, that's why she was awol. She was in their compartment."

"Shes a prefect? Cool! Well if anyone deserves to be one, Penny does."

"Right! Shes so kind and caring, and smart and pretty, she will be a perfect prefect." mused Madison half asleep already.

"Hmm..yes." chuckled Rowan "kind and perfect, that's our Penny. Maybe you should help her with her duties. You know – spend some quality time together?"

"If I can, of course I'll help her..wait? What are you talking about?" asked Madison stirring from her slumber.

"Oh come on Madison – she's-so-pretty-and-kind – you like her don't you?"

"Yes I like her, its Penny. Who would not like Penny?" Madison asked bewildered.

"I mean you like-like her" explained Rowan.

"What..I don't..I mean..I haven't even..shut up!" sputtered Madison wide awake now.

"Don't worry, I wont tell. But I just have to say, that I think you guys would make a nice couple." said Rowan and closed her curtains.

There was a long silence until Madison said quietly, almost as a whisper "I don't think shes into girls, she only ever seams to date guys."

"You wont know for sure until You ask her" whispered Rowan back.

Chapter 2

Next couple of weeks passed in a whirlwind. Madison was trying to focus hard on studying. For one thing, keeping her grades high was a matter of personal pride for her, but she also enjoyed most of her classes and sincerely wanted to learn as much as she could. So she became a human sponge of knowledge and spent most of her free time at the library. The only classes she didn't care about and wasn't interested in were astronomy and divination. Probably because both of them involved unreachable subjects, that had little to do with life on earth Madison thought to herself.

She did give herself little brakes from studying. Once or twice a week, she sneaked out after dinner and went flying around the Hogwarts grounds. Flying over the lake at twilight was her favorite route. Madison sped up as fast as her broom allowed and felt the thrill of the unknown. The vast darkness slowly creeping over the dark forest and the equally dark lake glimmering mysteriously below her. She finished her nights at the room of requirements, which turned into a sort of a gym for her. She spent the last hours of the day training. When she finally returned to her dorm room, she was exhausted, but content. She fell asleep instantly after these nights and indulged in a dreamless sleep – a luxury for her.

The promise she had made to herself (and also to Dumbledore) to not search for another vault proved difficult to keep. She made no effort to learn new information about the vaults nor Jacob, but that didn't mean, she was spared from it. Every night she didn't manage to train and exhaust herself physically, she spent tossing in her bed, dreaming. The dreams were all about Jacob. Her brother in the mist, surrounded by golden lines, calling out to her. She ran to him through the mist, but every time she got closer to him, an invisible wall, like glass, blocked him. Sometimes he spoke to her, but his voice was weak and muddled. When she woke up sweaty and drained, she could not remember his words, only the feeling of weight and guilt.

"What's up?" asked Tonks sitting down next to Madison during breakfast.

"Not much. What's up with you?" answered Madison taking a sip of her pumpkin juice.

"Doom. Ruin. Despare." sighed Tonks melodramatically.

"What's wrong? Is it the vaults? Is someone hurt?" exclaimed Madison half-rising from her seat.

"No. Unfortunately not. It's nothing." answered Tonks gloomily.

"Oh. Well you don't have to talk about it if you don't want to. But if I can help.." said Madison feeling confused.

“No. I mean it’s nothing. Nothing is going on. Nada. Zip. No curses, no vaults, no danger, no nothing. If this keeps up I’m going to transfer to Durmstrang just to find some excitement.”
“Well...what about dungbombs or fanged frisbees or..?”
“Naah. I can’t make myself throw a frisbee when Penny is looking at me with her “I-expect-better-from-You” look. Besides it’s not the same as the action we saw last year. I swear, if something doesn’t happen right this moment, I’m going to” but Tonks stopped mid-sentence and gaped at the teachers table.
At the very moment Dumbledore cleared his throat and spoke to the hall. “Good morning everyone! I hope you are all enjoying a delicious breakfast and are eager to start another day full of knowledge. Before you do however, I have some exciting news for you all. School council and our outstanding staff have decided to revive an old tradition.”
“Dueling for housepoints!” cried Tonks.
“Lessons in the lake?” cried an eager hufflepuff.
“Shackles for students!” cried Filch. Everyone went quiet and looked at Filch. He cursed under his breath and shuffled away using a tapestry passage as a quick getaway.
“Hm..hmm. Well no.” said Dumbledore with a slight frown looking after Filch. “We have decided to bring back the Celestial Ball.”
The hall started buzzing excitedly. “The ball will be held in two weeks”. The buzzing grew louder. “It will entail live music, food and dancing.” The racket in the hall was deafening now. “And you may all invite a friend, classmate or someone special with you as your date.”
The hall went deadly quiet for a moment and then erupted again, louder than ever.
“Well I’ll be..” said Tonks. “Just when I was giving up hope.”
“That’s cool I guess.” said Madison impassively.
“Cool? Of course it will be cool. What’s wrong with you?” asked Tonks looking bewildered.
“Hey guys!” Rowan joined them looking exited. “Some news right?”
“See – this is how one should look, when they have just learned, that something fun will happen to them.” said Tonks pointing to Rowan.
“What’s wrong Madison? Not excited about the ball?”
“No, I am. It’s just..”
“Aaah. I get it. You don’t know who to go with.” said Tonks with a knowing smile. “Well take your time and choose well. If you need, then I have a perfect test to weed out the bad seeds.”
“What do you mean a test?” asked Madison with interest.
“Well, this is what you do. You get like five or six dungbombs”
“Why do ALL of your plans involve dungbombs?” interrupted Rowan rolling her eyes.
“As I was saying” Tonks looked at Rowan sternly “you get like five or

six dungbombs and then find the most crowded spots in school. Like corridors after class ends, or quidditch stands before a game or something like that. Then – you drop the bomb."
"And?" asked Madison.
"When the crowd clears. The ones who are left standing are the good seeds. It's a sure thing, I assure you."
"Wait? The ones left standing? You mean the ones who don't run away from the smell?"
"Exactly! They are the fun ones. The ones, whose noses are trained after years of practice. Try it, I guarantee you a good time, date or no date" smiled Tonks and got up.
"I think her method might guarantee me a date with a stuffy nose." said Madison grumpily.
"What are you even talking about. We both know you want to invite Penny." said Rowan.
"Shh! We most certainly don't know that. And even if I did, that doesn't mean, that I was going to."
"Why the hell not?"
"Well for one thing – she's straight." - "You don't know that!"
"She's the most popular girl in school, she has probably been invited like fifty times during our conversation." - "That doesn't mean she has said yes to anyone."
"And most importantly – I don't want to mess with our friendship." - "That's just code for 'I'm scared'."
"Shut up. Who are you going with anyways?"
"I don't know yet for sure. But I'm hoping Ben might ask me." answered Rowan blushing slightly. "Ben? Really? Well if he won't, I'll talk some sense into him."
"Thanks, but no need. I'll ask him myself, if he hasn't done so by the end of the day. You see, some of us still have balls" said Rowan with dignity and stood from her chair leaving for class.
Hearing Rowan say balls with such bravado was too much for Madison. She started giggling to herself.

Chapter 3

But Rowan was right. Madison did want to ask Penny to the ball. Rowan was also right in assessing, that she was scared. What if Penny said no. What if she laughed and then said no. What if she said no and then they couldn't even be friends anymore. But during the next few days Madison started to notice something strange. Penny, who was always busy with hundreds of friends and classes and, more recently, prefect duties, started to hang around Madison more and more. She sat next to her during every meal, she found her at the library and one morning, when Madison had been training the night before, Tulip informed her, that Penny had came looking for her.
"She said she just wanted to study together, but I think, she had something else in mind." winked Tulip.
Against her own will, Madison felt the shimmerings of hope in the pit of her stomach.
She saw Penny at the potions class and sat next to her.
"Hey, you were looking for me yesterday?"
"Yeah, where were you? It was pretty late."
"I was blowing off some steam, training."
Penny looked at Madison appraisingly and bit her lip. "Oh I see."
"What did you want?" asked Madison blushing slightly at her gaze.
"Nothing much, just to hang. You are hard to track down, busy schedule it seems."
"Well hello pot, I'm kettle and we are both black" laughed Madison.
Penny chuckled "You're right. I've been so busy lately with the decoration committee for the ball, that I haven't even had a chance to find a date for it."
Madison felt her mouth go dry. Was she giving her a hint? Did she want her to ask her to the ball?
"Well I have..." But right at that moment Snape glided into the classroom and everyone went quiet. Talking in Snapes class was a high risk affair. And asking someone to the ball an even bigger one. Madison decided to postpone her conversation with Penny and focused on Wideye potion instead.
When class ended, she ran after Penny who had finished her potion first and left in a hurry.
"Penny wait!" she caught up to her near a painting of two witches casting a spell on a cow.
Penny turned around and looked at Madison.
"I wanted to ask.." why was this so hard ? "I didn't get a chance to.."
The witches in the painting looked away from the cow, now more interested in the conversation about to happen. "What I meant to say

was..”
Penny looked at her with slight disappointment in her eyes.
“You wanted to tell me who you are taking to the ball? Snape came in before you could. Well, who’s the lucky chosen one?” she smiled sadly.
“What? No, I’m not taking anyone.” oh crap! “I actually wanted to ask you, if you might want to come with me? It’s totally ok if you don’t, I just thought, well maybe, if you did, we might..have..some..fun..”
Madisons voice sank to almost a whisper. Might have some fun? She wanted the floor to open up so she could just fall away into oblivion.
The smile that broke in Pennys face was dazzling and for a split-second Madison feared, that one of the scenarios she had played in her mind of how this might go was coming true and Penny would laugh in her face.
“Of course I want to go to the ball with you!”
“Are you sure?” whats wrong with me?
“Yes I’m sure” laughed Penny and hugged Madison.
“You get that I will be your date and you will be mine?” Madison knew she sounded crazy, but she needed to make sure, that Penny understood what she meant.
“Yes I get that! I want to be your date and I want you to be mine. Why do you think I have been hanging around so much lately?”
“To study...” answered Madison slowly.
“I wanted you to ask me, you doofus. And I’m so glad that you finally did. We ARE going to have so much fun together!”
Slowly, almost carefully, Madison started to smile too. “Well then. Great. I mean..great! Excellent! That’s settled then.”
“Yes, it is. Oh, you just wait when you see my dress, it’s perfect for twirling.”
“Twirling? Oh, you mean dancing, right right. Of course, I know how to dance, of course” Oh hell. Madison suddenly felt she had missed some crucial points about the ball – like the fact that people danced at balls.
“Well I have to run to care for magical creatures now. I’ll see you at dinner Madison.” Penny started to leave, but turned around and kissed Madison on the cheek “Thank you for being braver than I was.”
Madison stood still as a statue long after Penny was gone and felt the spot on her cheek tingle and a warm glow spread through her whole body. Dance? Never mind dancing, with Penny Haywood as her date, she could probably fly to the ball.

The slightly euphoric feeling of having Penny Haywood as her date stayed with Madison for the whole of the week prior to the event itself. She felt giddy with happiness for many reasons. The main one

was of course that Penny had said yes. But she was also proud of herself for actually asking her and not chickening out. That feeling was mutually shared by Rowan, Tulip and Tonks. All of the girls could not stop talking about the ball. Who was going to wear what and who was taking whom. Ben had asked Rowan the very day of the announcement and Charlie Weasley and Tulip were always together both in class and outside of it, so they were naturally going together. Tonks had asked a boy from ravenclaw Madison didn't know. "He started throwing stink pellets when everyone was running away from my dungbombs. I knew he would be good fun then and there." explained Tonks.

Finally the night of the ball arrived. Madison had agreed she would meet Penny at the hall entrance and went to the dormitory to get dressed. Her room was a mess. All of the occupants had emptied their trunks and the room was full of discarded clothes and make-up kits.

"Who is Barnaby going with?" asked Tulip while applying eye-liner.

"Ismelda I think." answered Madison.

"Really? And who did the asking?"

"Ismelda did. She asked him after transfiguration on Monday."

"Wow. An odd couple if there ever was one" said Rowan raising her eyebrows.

"You think? I don't know. I think they might go well together. Barnaby is so sweet and kindhearted, it might do Ismelda some good to be around him. And she obviously likes him a lot. I think it's nice."

Madison opted to wear a black vest over a white shirt and black trousers as she never really liked dresses nor skirts that much. She did wonder for a moment if Penny expected her to show up in a dress, but then thought better of it. After all, Penny knew her well and would not want her to be uncomfortable. She did try to manage her hair, but was not successful. Her hair was naturally curly and she kept it shortish for practical reasons. When she tried to force it straight, Rowan had to spend 15 minutes untangling her comb from her dark main. The other girls took a lot longer than Madison, so she lounged in her bed and waited as they got ready.

When the time came to go downstairs, Madison felt butterflies in her stomach and her palms started to get sweaty. Everyone were nervous it seamed and the common room was unusually rowdy. Girls were giggling loudly and boys were poking each other and behaving especially boisterously to ease the tension. Madison went ahead of the others as she didn't want Penny to have to wait for her before entering the hall.

The noise at the hall entrance was impressive. Even the teachers seamed to enjoy the festive mood as they did nothing to silence the students, quite the opposite – Madam Hooches roaring laughter was

heard all over and professor McGonagall smiled at Peeves who glided above the students throwing glitter over them. Madison stood near the entrance and looked around. She saw Barnaby and Ismelda enter the hall, deep in conversation. Ismelda was holding Barnabys hand and he was explaining something to her. Smiling at the sight Madison felt someone tugging her sleeve and she turned around. Her mouth fell open and she felt her heart starting to beat faster. Penny was standing before her in a yellow skirt with a white top, her golden hair flowing down on her shoulders smiling shyly.
“Hey.”
“…”
“Madison?”
“Huh? Oh hey”
“What’s wrong” asked Penny with a slightly perturbed expression.
“Nn..nothing..khmm. I. You. Khkhmm.” stop acting like an idiot. “You look. Well you look beautiful!”
“Thank you, so do you” beamed Penny. “Shall we go in?”
“Yes. Let’s go.” Madison took a deep calming breath. Maybe I could take her hand? Or would that be too bold. Maybe she thinks we came as friends and I will mess it up. Or maybe if I…
“Come on, I want you to see the hall already. We finished decorating it just like two hours ago and I think it looks amazing.” said Penny and took Madisons hand.
The hall was indeed gorgeous. Instead of long table candles, bouquets of flowers were floating in the air, with little tea candles in the middle of them. As a result, the hall was dimmer than usual and the air smelled like spring. The four long housetables were replaced with many smaller ones, that seated 5-6 people around them and were also decorated with flowers and candles. Hundreds of fireflies were flying slowly around the hall and the ceiling above was a clear night sky full of stars that were much closer than they normally would be. Stardust fell from some of the stars and descended slowly down among the students, fading away before reaching the floor.
“Dumbledore charmed the ceiling especially, it’s a celestial ball after all.” said Penny when she saw Madison looking up.
“Everything looks stunning, you did an amazing job decorating Penny.” answered Madison still looking around in awe.
“Thanks. Come on, let’s sit down for a moment. Dumbledore will speak before the party starts.”
They sat near the teachers table and were soon joined by Tonks and Adam, the-stink-pellet-guy, and Ben and Rowan. Dumbledore greeted everyone jovially and thanked Penny especially for her work as the head of the decorating committee. Everyone clapped and cheered and Penny blushed with delight. Soon everyone were on the dance floor.

Madison had been afraid of this. She hadn't had much practice dancing, having never really been at parties that involved that particular skill, but it seamed to come naturally as she started to listen to the music and keeping a rhythm with Penny. Soon she had forgotten all of her trepidations and feeling relaxed, she let the music and the mood of the night take a hold over her. She even had the courage to lift and twirl Penny during one of the faster songs. Penny squealed and held Madison tightly around the neck. Madison put her down quickly, feeling that she may have overstepped.
"Sorry. I just, got carried away." she said sheepishly rubbing the back of her neck.
"No, it's fine. I just didn't know you were so strong." said Penny and grabbed her hands, pulling her closer as they swayed around to a slower song.
"Hah! You weigh like nothing. A pixie could lift you." laughed Madison. "And you did say your dress was perfect for twirling, so twirl I did."
Penny laughed "That you did." She put her arms around Madisons neck. "And I didn't mind at all" she said more quietly in her ear. Madison felt her nape grow hot and her heart rate increase. She looked at Penny who was suddenly very close to her, her hands still around Madisons neck. She looked back at her and the blue in her eyes darkened slightly. Madison licked her lips. She didn't hear the music clearly anymore, something was wrong with her ears. Everything sounded as if it came through a pillow, muffled and far away. She leaned a bit closer still. She could see Pennys eyelashes now. She tightened her hold on Madisons neck and looked at her lips, her eyes darker than ever. "Penny. Can I..."
A loud gong ran through the hall and suddenly the music stopped. All the torches shined instantly and the hall was abruptly filled with light. Blinking with confusion Madison looked around. Dumbledore was on his feet with his wand in his hand. It must have been him who had sounded the gong and stopped the party. Snape, McGonagall and professor Sprout were next to him, their wands also in their hands.
"Everyone! Listen to me. You are not the leave this hall. All prefects find the headboy and girl, you will be given instructions. Everyone else stay where you are and do not leave this area. I will explain everything in a short while." Dumbledore moved swiftly through the students and exited the main doors, Snape, Sprout and McGonagall close behind.
"What the hell?" Madison looked around. Everyone were looking confused and a bit scared.
"I have to go." said Penny "I'm a prefect."
"Right. Go, go." said Madison and let go of Penny with a sinking

feeling. “I’ll be at the table when you are finished.” Penny started pushing herself through the mass of people in the dance floor, looking back at Madison with an apologetic smile.
Madison slouched back to the table slowly pondering the unexpected interruption. What was going on? It had to have been something really serious for Dumbledore to end the party so abruptly. It also might still be going on, because Dumbledore had left with no explanation. Rowan, Ben, Tulip and Charlie were at the table when Madison sat beside them.
“What do think is going on?” asked Charlie
“No idea, nothing good I bet” answered Madison.
“Yeah, it doesn’t look like it” said Ben throwing an arm around Rowan.
“Really weird that they didn’t explain anything to us. Dumbeldore isn’t usually like this.” said Tulip thoughtfully.
“I know. It made me think, that something, might still be going on, he was in a hurry.”
“Well whatever it is, it interrupted one hell of a night.” said Rowan in a calm voice.
“It did indeed” said Madison looking wistfully at the flowers hanging above her.
“For you especially I think” snickered Tulip.
“Yeah, you were pretty close with Penny there. Couldn’t have squeezed a pygmy puff between you two.” said Charlie with a smirk.
Madison only scoffed and looked around trying to spot the blond prefect in the crowd. If something was still going on and it was dangerous enough for Dumbledore to ban students from leaving the hall, she wanted to keep Penny close to her.

Chapter 4

Students were getting restless. About half an hour had passed since Dumbledore had left. No one had moved from the great hall. Most of the pupils were sitting around the small tables, whispering anxiously among themselves. Madam Hooch together with professors Sinistra and Kettleburn were walking around the edges of the hall. Madison noted, that all of them had one hand in their pockets, clutching their wand.
Suddenly someone started crying on the other side of the hall. Madison looked around to see who it was, but the wall of students and the massive decorations were too thick.
“What now?” asked Ben startled.
“Someone’s crying.” said Rowan quietly.
“Nerves probably” said Tonks, who had joined the table. “It’s getting on my nerves too, being stuck here.”
“It sounds familiar...” said Madison getting up from her chair.
“It’s your golden girlfriend Steward” Merula was walking past them “started bawling out of the blue”.
Madison was halfway across the hall on her way towards Penny, when the main door opened and professor McGonagall entered. The hall fell still and silent except for Penny, who ran towards the grave looking professor. She met her near the door and McGonagall whispered something urgently into her ear. She looked at her wide eyed, with tears still leaking, but nodded and ran outside into the corridor. McGonagall moved quickly through the students and whispered something to professor Sinistra and Madam Hooch. Then she left as hurriedly as she had appeared.
Madam Hooch climbed up the small steps in front of the teachers table and yelled out in a booming voice “All students line up behind your prefects and band together. We will escort you back to your dormitories.” This was so confusing, that almost everyone started grumbling loudly. Professor Sinistra joined Madam Hooch at the podium and raised her hands in an attempt to quiet the crowd.
“Professor Dumbledore will explain everything to you tomorrow. All we can say right now is that, no one is injured..as such...but there has been an attack concerning a student. Now please form lines and return to your dormitories.”
Madison stood dumbfound in the middle of the hall, when she saw Ravenclaw prefect Andre Egwu pass near her. “Andre! Wait a moment.”
Andre stopped and stood waiting for Madison to reach him.
“What’s up?” he asked.

“What happened? I mean with Penny? Why did she cry? And why did she leave after McGonagall came? Why did the prefects have to congregate?”
“We had to do a headcount.” answered Andre in a gloomy voice “and we found one student missing” Madison understood before Andre could finish his sentence “Beatrice Haywood from Hufflepuff, Pennys little sister.”

“Poor Penny.” said Rowan when they had returned to their rooms. “I wish we could go and..help..or something..”
“I know, me too.” said Madison. It was maddening to put on her pyjamas and go to bed as if nothing had happened, as if somewhere in the castle Penny wasn’t crying her eyes out. Madison wanted to go to her so badly, she even considered sneaking out. That plan was a no go though, as she had no idea were Penny and her sister would be. Beatrice wasn’t hurt as professor Sinistra had said, so that ruled out the hospital wing. And if that wasn’t enough to deter Madison from going, Rowan had explained in a stern voice “There is an unknown danger lurking around in the castle, we have no idea who or what or where it is. No way you are leaving this room in the middle of the night. I will block the door myself if I have to. We will find Penny first thing tomorrow, I promise.” Reluctantly Madison agreed and threw herself on her bed.
Sleep didn’t come easily, but that didn’t surprise Madison. She tossed and turned for hours thinking about Penny and Beatrice. When the first pink light of a new day started to appear behind her window, she finally fell into a fitful sleep. Familiar mist arose around her. Already expecting it, she saw the golden lines, she had seen many times in her dreams about Jacob in the distance. She started towards them, running as fast as she could, her brothers muffled voice in her ears. The lines came closer and closer and she could see, as she had many times before, that they formed a square. As soon, as she registered this, she collided with the invisible wall. But something was different than before. She could not see Jacob. There was someone standing before her, someone much smaller, with blonde hair. And she was crying. “It sounds familiar...” thought Madison to herself. And suddenly she jumped in shock. The mist was gone, she was sitting upright in her bed, sweat pouring down her face.
“Beatrice!” The small someone, who had replaced her brother in her dreams was Pennys sister.

Chapter 5

Madison was out of bed and almost halfway out of the portrait door before she realized–she had no idea were to go. She knew, that she had to do something. But what? She stopped herself and backtracked into Gryffindors common room. The Fat Lady muttered something in an annoyed voice before closing. Madison sat down in front of an extinct fireplace and put her head in her hands. She had to calm down first and think. What was it she had seen? It was only a dream. No doubt Beatrice had replaced Jacob in her mind because she was the last thing she thought about before she fell asleep. Right? And Dumbledore had ordered Madison to stop looking for the vaults, in effect asking her to stop looking for her brother. But the dream was nagging Madison. The presence of Beatrice in it had unraveled something in her brain. The mist seamed less dense somehow, the golden lines seamed more defined. Was this something Dumbledore should know? But know what? That she had had a dream about Pennys sister? That was stupid. Madison was feeling more and more foolish as the minutes passed. She stood and sighed. Light was pouring in from the windows. There was no point in telling anyone about the dream. What good would it do? The only thing she could do, was to find out what had happened to Beatrice and help and console Penny. Resolved, she climbed out the portrait door. The Fat Lady looked after her with mild irritation as she disappeared behind a statue.
There were only a couple of early birds having breakfast when Madison entered the hall. The decorations for the ball were gone. Everything was as it had always been. It was hard to believe, that less than twelve hours ago, she had danced here with Penny. In fact, she had done more than danced. She had almost kissed her. Madison shook her head. This was not the time to think about that. She had to find the Haywood sisters. Looking around, hoping to find someone to ask, she saw professor McGonagall having breakfast. Of course she was up with first light, even on a Saturday. Slowly, Madison approached the teachers table. She didn't want to disturb her during her meal and decided to wait until she was finished. Sitting down at the very end of Gryffindor table, where she was closest to the teachers table, she gulped some orange juice and kept an eye on the professor. McGonagall had already finished her porridge and was drinking her coffee when her eye met Madisons. Madison blushed slightly and looked down. When she looked up, she saw that professor McGonagall was waving her over. She got up quickly and climbed up to the teachers podium.
"Good morning miss Steward."

“Good morning professor.”
“Well? I have never seen You having breakfast this early before. In fact, you have been late on more than one occasion to my morning classes. So, what can I do for You?”
“I’m sorry professor, I didn’t mean to disturb You. I just wanted to know, what happened to Beatrice Haywood and were is she?”
McGonagall sighed. “As we said yesterday, professor Dumbledore will explain everything to you today. I believe, he will address the school during lunch.” Seeing Madisons face fall, McGonagall leaned back in her chair. “I do believe you are asking about the whereabouts of miss Penny Haywood as much as you are about her little sister?”
“I..well yes. I want to..I don’t know..be with her and see how she is.” answered Madison a bit sheepishly.
“I figured” said McGonagall more kindly. “Well I can’t tell you all the details, but I can tell you, that you will most likely find the elder miss Haywood in her common room. I sent her there myself just half an hour ago.”
“Thank You professor!” exclaimed Madison and jumped down the podium, running to the main door.
“No running in the hall!” barked professor McGonagall after her.
She rushed downstairs and passed the potions classroom. The Hufflepuffs common room was near the kitchens and if she waited long enough, someone was bound to come by and let her in or at least tell Penny, that she was there. But Madison didn’t have to wait. She ran into Penny herself in front of a painting of a fruit bowl.
“Penny!” puffed Madison. “I was just looking for you. What is going on? What happened to your sister?”
Pennys eyes were red and she looked thoroughly miserable. She hiccuped and threw her arms around Madison. “Oh, it’s awful Madison. I can’t help her. I can’t even talk to her properly. And Dumbledore can’t help, no one can help.”
Madison held Penny gently and asked again “But what happened? Where is she?”
“She’s inside a painting.”
“Oh she’s. What?”
“Inside a painting. I know, it sounds unbelievable. But she is. On the second floor next to the stairs. She’s inside it and can’t get out. And no one knows how she got there or how to get her out.” Madisons head was buzzing. She hugged Penny more tightly “Oh Penny, I’m so sorry. What can I do?”
“Nothing, that’s the worst part, even the teachers have no idea how it happened or who or...professor McGonagall said I should go and try to sleep, but I just can’t leave her there.”
“I understand. Is it ok if I go with you and see her?”

“Of course, thank You.”
Penny didn’t let go of Madisons hand when they moved back upstairs through the corridors. Approaching the second floor staircase, Penny held Madisons hand tighter and Madison squeezed her hand back, wanting to comfort and encourage the blond haired girl all at once.
The staircase was not empty. Professor Dumbledore, Sprout and Snape were all standing in front of a portrait Madison assumed was the one Beatrice was trapped in. Dumbledore turned and looked at them kindly. “Miss Haywood. I expected, that professor McGonagall was laboring in vain trying to send you to bed.”
“We should think about sealing off these stairs Dumbledore. More students will come nosing around when the story spreads” said Snape under his breath.
“Well even so, we can’t deny miss Haywood access to her sister” said Sprout sternly looking at Snape.
Madison inched closer, keeping her distance from Snape. The painting they were standing in front of was a large one. In the middle of it stood a little blonde girl tapping her fist at them as if trying to break a window. She had tears in her eyes and her lips were moving, but no sound reached them. She was surrounded by the golden frame of the painting.
Madison blinked, her mouth went dry and she felt her knees grow weak.
“Madison?” asked Penny who had felt Madisons hand tremble.
“I’ve seen it.” said Madison quietly, looking at Beatrice intently.
“What do you mean miss Steward?” asked Dumbledore turning himself fully to face her.
“I’ve seen it in my dreams. I mean I saw Beatrice last night, but I’ve seen my brother trapped inside this painting for months now.”
“Please explain further.” said Dumbledore intently.
“The golden lines, they are the frame” Madison was speaking to herself as much as to the others. Everything made sense now. The golden square she had seen form around her brother was a frame and the invisible wall that stopped her from reaching him was not a wall, but the surface of a painting.
“And you never thought to tell someone about these dreams you were having?” asked Snape looking at Madison.
“Severus, please.” said Dumbledore “I suggest we move this conversation to my office. Could you please accompany me miss Steward? Miss Haywood, I suggest, as professor McGonagall tried, that you go and rest. I will keep you informed, I promise. Severus, Pomona – I will talk to you after breakfast.”
Madison tore her eyes away from Beatrice and looked at her sister. Penny had let go of her hand and stared back at her with a look in her

eyes, that made Madison shudder. “Penny, I..”
“You knew?” whispered Penny and stepped away from Madison.
“No, I didn’t. I mean I didn’t know I knew you know. I mean...”
But Penny turned her back to Madison and walked down the stairs disappearing behind the same corner they had arrived from.
“Penny!” Madison wanted to go after her and try to explain, but Dumbledore took her shoulder gently. “She is tired and worried, she has not slept. There will be time for explanations later on, but for now I must insist, that you come with me and tell me the whole tale, it will be in the best interest of both miss Haywoods, I assure you.”
Dumbledore guided Madison up the stairs. Looking back she saw professor Snape still standing in front of the portrait, watching her curiously.

Madison had been to Dumbledores office before. Her search for the vaults had lead her there on many occasions. “Hi Fawkes” she whispered when she passed the bird. Fawkes blinked at her and spread her wings as if greeting her back.
“Now then” Dumbledore sat at his chair and gestured for Madison to sit as well. “Could you please tell me everything you can about your dreams. And I must stress, that I mean everything. No detail is insignificant.”
Madison sat, and drawing her breath, she recounted every detail she could to Dumbledore. Everything about the dreams she remembered. The golden lines, the mist, her brothers voice and the invisible wall that was separating them. She kept her head down, looking at her shoes instead of Dumbledore. When she was finished, she waited a bit, but when Dumbledore didn’t say anything, she looked up at him. Dumbledore was looking deep in thought, the tips of his fingers together on the table.
“Professor?” said Madison quietly.
“Thank You for telling me all this Madison.” said Dumbledore, still seemingly wrapped in his thoughts.
“I’m sorry.” said Madison in almost a whisper.
“I peg your pardon?” asked Dumbledore, coming out of his thoughts.
“For not telling you about this earlier. If I did, then maybe –”
“I’m sorry to have to interrupt you, but I can’t let you think, even for a second, that you are in any way to blame for what happened to the youngest miss Haywood. If anyone is to blame it is me.” said Dumbledore in a heavy sigh.
“Sir?”
“You see – looking back now, I think, that I was too severe on you last year. In my defense, I was worried for your safety and hoped to spare you hurt by blocking your attempts at finding your brother. It would

seem now, that this approach was, though not completely wrong, too extreme. A bond between siblings is strong indeed and in trying to keep you safe, I have unwillingly let open a new, undesirable connection between the two of you."
"I don't understand Sir."
"You see, your brother was a very competent young wizard. One, among his many talents, was legilimency. This particular gift is the only explanation to your dreams. He has been trying to contact you through your dreams."
"So I should have said something, I could have helped." said Madison in despair.
"How could you have possibly known? It would be understandable for you to dream about Jacob, he is your brother after all. No one would have made the connection between these dreams and the vaults."
"But what has this all got to do with Beatrice and the portrait?"
"Well I can't be sure of course, but I would guess, that the trapping of miss Haywood signals, that another vault has been opened."
Madison stayed quiet for a while. Voices of students could faintly be heard through the window. Breakfast was over.
"All of this. The vaults, the ice, the boggarts – all of this is because of me and Jacob. If I hadn't been looking for him, none of this would have happened."
"As I said before – a bond between siblings is strong. I'm quite sure in presuming, that even if you had not been looking for your brother, he would have found ways to contact you. As he has now." said Dumbledore.
"But what was he doing? Where is he? And why is Beatrice trapped?"
"Ahh. An old professors deepest fear – questions one can't answer. All we know for sure, is that miss Haywoods predicament is connected to your brother and, by extension – you. And in light of that information, I urge you to come and talk to me if your dreams change, if any information may come to light. But I stress, that you yourself do not try and look for your brother. The contains of the cursed vaults are unknown and the dangers inside them are not for students to conquer."
"But my brother, he looked for them."
"You and your brother are very different people Madison" Dumbledore smiled at her "He was always very calculating and resolute, driven by his mind and will. You are driven by your heart. This does not make you weaker" said Dumbledore, seeing the look in Madisons eyes "on the contrary, it is my humble opinion, that this makes you stronger. One should not only measure ones actions, but look at the heart of those actions as well. You are an extraordinary witch Madison, it is time you recognize that and judge yourself

separate from your brother."
Madison didn't say anything to that. She wasn't sure, she was understanding Dumbledore completely, but didn't know what to ask from him anymore. She couldn't help the feeling of guilt in her guts and Pennys angry face lingered in her mind making her feel worse by the second.
"Go on now. Find miss Haywood and talk to her. And remember – any new developments in your dreams, come find me."
"Thank You professor." Madison smiled slightly at Dumbledore and left the room.

Chapter 6

Madison took her time walking back to Gryffindors common room from Dumbledores office. Her head was full of snippets from their conversation. No matter what the headmaster had said, Madison felt the sickening feeling of guilt spread through her. What agitated her most of all was that she felt so powerless, so incompetent. She had no idea how to help Beatrice. She was supposed to be the link between the vaults and her brother, but aside from sleeping in hopes of dreaming something new, she had no conception of what to do. Well she knew one thing – she had to talk to Penny. She had to explain to her, that she had no idea what her dreams meant. Thinking about Penny made her insides ache. Madison stopped dead in front of the Fat Lady and turned on the spot, walking back towards the staircases.
“Again? Are You kidding me?” yelled the Fat Lady to her retreating back.
This time Madison wasn’t so lucky. She waited near the Hufflepuff common room for about ten minutes before she saw a second year boy she recognized as Hufflepuff. She asked him to tell Penny that she wanted to talk to her. “But if she’s asleep, don’t wake her.” she yelled after him. Madison paced the corridor, growing more nervous by the second. Finally Penny emerged from behind some barrels and stood to face Madison, her arms crossed and her face stony.
“Penny. Thank you for coming. You weren’t asleep were you?” asked Madison anxiously.
“No. How do you think I could sleep at a time like this?” Pennys voice was so icy, that Madisons panic grew to desperation.
“Listen – you have to understand. I didn’t know, that I was seeing paintings in my dreams. I thought I was just seeing my brother and you know..dream things.”
“Why didn’t you tell Dumbledore you had these dreams?”
“Well, he told me last year to stop searching for my brother, and I -”
“Did he tell you to stop dreaming about your brother?”
“What? No, of course not.”
“Why didn’t you tell someone then?”
“I just didn’t think the dreams were important. I wanted to have a normal, peaceful year. I didn’t think that - “
“That is obvious.” Penny said with disdain. “You don’t think much about others do you Madison? You wanted a peaceful year. You didn’t want to tell anyone. You you you! What about my sister? Do you think she will have a peaceful first year at Hogwarts? Or me? Do you think I will have a good year with my baby sister trapped in a portrait?”
“Penny! I’m sorry! I didn’t want any of this, you must know that.”

Madison reached out her arm to Pennys, but she recoiled in anger. “Don’t touch me! You didn’t want this? This is ALL you wanted. From the first moment in here you have done nothing but search for your precious brother. Never mind the dangers you unleashed or the consequences it brought. You, your brother and the bloody vaults, it’s all that matter to you isn’t it? Well I’m done with it all. You stay away from me and my sister! You’ve done enough damage as it is.” Penny turned swiftly and walked back to her common room. Madison remained standing, her hand still half raised.

“Where have you been? I’ve been looking for you all evening. Do you know about Beatrice, she’s inside a painting, like actually inside it. I can’t even imagine what kind of magic would make her…What’s wrong? You look like hell! Madison?” Rowan put down the book she was reading and stood up. “What happened?”
“Nothing. I was outside, flying.” said Madison pulling her hoodie over her head. She tried to keep her face hidden. She was exhausted and the last thing she wanted was to explain everything that had happened to Rowan.
“Did you see Penny?”
“Yes.”
“And?”
“And what?”
“Did you have a fight or…something?” asked Rowan cautiously.
“Or something.” muttered Madison “Listen Rowan, I’m really not in the mood to talk right now. I’m sorry. I just want to sleep.”
“Ok, sure thing.” Rowan sat back down on her bed and Madison pulled her curtains.
“But if you want to talk then…”
Madison swallowed and said in a hoarse voice “Thank you Rowan.”

Chapter 7

When Madison opened her eyes, the room was empty. She looked outside – it looked like mid morning. She had slept, really slept. She sat up in her bed and hit her fist against her knee. “Dammit!” She had not dreamed. For once, when she had wished for the mist and Jacob to appear, they had not. “Dammit!” she said again aloud. She got out of bed sighing and walked to the window. Breakfast would soon be over. She almost wanted to crawl back to bed and try to fall asleep again. She however remained standing at the window for some time, trying to gather her thoughts. She hadn’t felt this way since her first days at Hogwarts. She saw students lounging around on the grounds, laughing and playing games among themselves. She felt distant from them, like an outsider. Secretly watching them enjoying their Sunday. Why did she have to have a curse-breaker for a brother. Why could she not hang around with her friends, play wizards chess and worry about exams. She could be like them. She could be laying on her back with her head on Pennys lap, laughing at something Tonks had said, trying to get Rowan to study less and relax more. She could see it clearly in her mind. Penny smiling at her, holding her hand. Maybe if things went well, and she could muster up the courage, she could ask Penny to be her...

Madison shook her head. There was no point in this daydream. It only made her feel weaker. This was not the time to wallow in self-pity. She had to do something. During her years in Hogwarts, Madison had learned one thing – when you had no idea what to do, then library was the place to go. She got dressed and deciding to skip breakfast headed down the corridor.

It came as no surprise to Madison, that the first person she saw at the library was Rowan. She practically lived there.

“Hey.” she said sitting down next to her.

“Madison?” Rowan looked up from her book surprised. “Why are you here so early?”

“Doubting my commitment to the academia?” smiled Madison sadly.

“No. But you are never here so early. And on a Sunday.”

“I need information.”

“Yes, that sums up the purpose of the library. What information?”

“Hard to say” sighed Madison. “Something about paintings, curses and legilimency I suppose.”

“That’s a curious selection.” said Rowan raising her eyebrows. “Listen, I wanted to talk to you. About Penny.”

“What about her?” asked Madison warily.

“I talked to Diego during breakfast. He said, that Penny was really

angry...with you..."
Madison looked at her hands. "I'm aware."
"That's why I wanted to talk with you." Rowan looked around for Madam Pince before leaning in and whispering a bit more urgently "you do understand, that she is not thinking clearly right now. She is really worried about her sister and whatever she said to you, you can't take it to heart. She will calm down when her sister is freed and the two of you will make up, I'm sure of it."
Madison didn't know what to say to that. "Ok."
Rowan looked worried. "Did you have a big fight?"
"You could say that, yes."
"Well I'm sure after some time passes she – "
"I don't think she will Rowan." sighed Madison "She was so mad. Not even mad, she was furious with me. And she had every right to be."
"What do you mean?"
Taking a big breath Madison recounted the events from last night to Rowan. "and that's why I'm here looking for books on legilimency. I have to do something to make this right. I can't stand her hating me."
"She doesn't hate you, she's just panicked about Beatrice."
"You should have seen her yesterday."
"Fear and anger go hand in hand you know." said Rowan soothingly.
Madison looked at her friend a little surprised. "Has anyone ever said to you, that you are too wise for a teenager?"
"Yes, at least once a week." laughed Rowan. "You should listen to Dumbledore, you didn't do anything wrong. What happened to Beatrice is not your fault."
Madison didn't say anything. It relieved her to hear Rowan say that, but she couldn't make herself believe it fully. "I'm going to try and find something on legilimency. Thanks for the talk Rowan."

Hours later Madison was surrounded by piles of grubby looking books. Legilimency was not a popular subject, judging by the layers of dust on the books. She had however found out the main principles of it and how it worked. The problem was, that Jacob was apparently very gifted in the art, because he could penetrate her dreams from god knows how long a distance. Madison in turn had no idea how to try and enter her brothers mind. She had never done it, not to mention, she had no clue where Jacob was. Yawning, she shut the book she had been browsing and got up, thinking about lunch. Her stomach growled loudly, reminding her, that she had skipped breakfast. She would return after eating and try and find something about cursed paintings.
When Madison reached the great hall, it was emptying. She had missed lunch. Madison groaned loudly. Her stomach was starting to feel like it was sticking to her back, she was so hungry. She saw

Barnaby, Tonks and Tulip sitting together and went to join them.
“Hey! There’s our missing curse-breaker.” said Tulip. Madison flinched hearing the nickname.
“Are you on a diet or something? You missed breakfast and lunch.” asked Tonks.
“Didn’t mean to. I lost track of time in the library.”
“That is the saddest thing I have heard all day.” said Tonks her eyebrows raised. “You are spending too much time with Rowan.”
“You don’t have to diet Madison.” said Barnaby looking bewildered.
“Thanks Barnaby.” smiled Madison.
“How are you doing?” asked Tulip looking at her.
“Fine. Hungry but fine.”
“Dumbledore explained what happened to Beatrice before lunch. He said we should move around the school in pairs and we can’t leave our common rooms after hours until the situation is handled.”
“Yeah, I figured. He said another vault might be opened.”
“So? What’s the plan?” asked Tonks looking excited.
“What do you mean?” asked Madison startled.
“The plan. For the vault. Where do we start?”
“Where we..? Start what?”
“Merlins pants! You really need food to function don’t you? You are slower than a flobberworm with an empty stomach.” sighed Tonks.
“How do we start looking for the vault?” she said really slowly as if talking to a person who is hard of hearing.
“We? No! No way. I’m not...I don’t want any of you to...” Madison took a deep breath. “I mean that there is no we. Thank you but WE will not do anything. I can’t put you guys into anymore danger. I’ve done enough.”
“Flobberworms eat vegetables you know. Is that the diet you are using?” asked Barnaby curiously.
Madison looked at him “What? No Barnaby, I’m not on a diet.”
“Although the mucus comes out easier when they are hungry. That’s what Snape said when I had to squeeze them for the sleeping draught potion.” All three girls looked speechlessly at Barnaby.
“Madison. You haven’t put us in any danger. If anything, you have saved us all on more than one occasion from danger.” said Tulip seriously.
“There wouldn’t have been any danger for you guys without me.” said Madison quietly.
“That’s the part about being friends with you I like the best” grinned Tonks.
Tulip looked at Tonks sternly and continued “Did something happen? You are acting really strange.”
“It’s the empty stomach. I always feel lightheaded and confused when

I haven't eaten." said Barnaby.
"I'm fine guys, really. I'm going back to library to wait for dinner. See you around." Madison got up and left the hall. Tonks and Tulip looked after her with concern on their faces.

Madison wandered out from the hall again. She started walking back towards the library, her hands in her pockets and her head down. She didn't have high expectations to find something useful, but she felt the need to keep looking just to be doing something.
Turning a corner she collided hard with someone.
"Umphh. Sorry! I didn't look where I was..Penny." Madison breath caught in her throat. Penny was looking just as abashed as she was feeling. She bent down to pick up her books that had fallen from her arms. Madison stooped quickly to help her. "Here." she handed her some of her books. "And...sorry again." Her apology lingered in the silence. Penny looked daunted and tired, but less angry than she had on their last meeting. "It's ok." she said not looking straight at Madison, and taking her books she left. Madison sighed and walked on. She was feeling so miserable, that it wouldn't have surprised her, if there had been a dementor moving along with her in the now empty corridor.

Chapter 8

The second trip to the library was even more unsuccessful than the first one. The books about paintings were numerous, but unhelpful. They didn't cover curses or trappings. Since Madison had no clue what kind of a curse had been used to trap Beatrice, she didn't find anything useful from books about offensive spells either. She was getting sleepy, looking for unknown advice from hundreds of books was making her head feel thick and slow. She yawned for the hundredth time and got up to leave. At least there would be another chance for a new dream tonight.
She made her way downstairs for dinner. If she could only find something, anything. She just needed food and sleep. If she could sleep for as long as she needed to make her dream.
But food first, otherwise Barnaby would think she really was on a diet.
Suddenly Madison stopped. That's it! Barnaby had mentioned sleeping draught. How had Madison not thought of it on her own? Of course! That's what she needed to do. She needed to dream, therefore she needed to sleep as long as she could. And what better way to guarantee sleep, than a potion.
Madison almost jumped with excitement. But where would she get the potion? Snape wouldn't give her the potion even if she was hallucinating from sleep deprivation, and she had no idea how to make one herself. Penny! Madison shook her head. No way she was asking Penny. She had asked her to stay away from her and Madison didn't want to make things worse between them. She had to deal with this one on her own, no more getting her friends in trouble. And suddenly Madison knew where to go. She had a place she used, when she wanted to be alone, undisturbed. A magnificent place as a matter of fact. A smile started to spread on Madisons face. She had the answer – the room of requirements.
She sighed a small sigh of relief. It felt good to have a plan, she felt her head clear and she stood a little straighter. She knew the room like no one else, having used it for years now. She almost skipped dinner and headed straight to the seventh floor, but her stomach gave a load protesting rumble and she decided to postpone her plan until after dinner.

Madison wolfed down her steak and kidney pie at an alarming speed. All she thought about was getting to the room of requirements as fast as she could. Ben and Rowan were sitting across from her and were watching her with some concern.
"Did you find something useful in the library?" asked Rowan.

“Not really.”
“Do you want our help? We could all go and search together.” offered Rowan.
“Thanks, but I’m not going back to the library today.”
“So you have a plan?” asked Ben looking apprehensive.
Madison avoided their eyes. “No, I’m just going to train for a bit I think.” She hated lying to her friends, but she was determined not to get them involved. This was her fault, no matter what Dumbledore had said and she alone would deal with the consequences.
“You sure?” asked Rowan uncertainly.
“Yes. I want to clear my head, it has been a crazy weekend.”
“You can say that again. It never even occurred to me, to be scared of paintings. But now...” sighed Ben.
Madison pushed her plate away from her and got up. “I’ll see you later guys.”
She walked quickly towards the seventh floor, taking every shortcut she knew. Standing in front of the familiar wall she closed her eyes. I need a place where I can contact my brother. A place that helps me find Beatrice. Somewhere, where I can make a sleeping draught potion, or find one or... She paced in front of the wall, concentrating hard on Jacob and Beatrice. Finally she opened her eyes and sighed in relief – a door had appeared. It seemed the room had offered up at least some version of help for Madison. She entered the door quickly.

Ordinarily, when Madison came to train, the room was filled with barbells, punching bags, mats, lifting bars and protective gloves. There was usually a shelf with water bottles and towels in the corner. Now the room looked completely different. It was much smaller and contained a large king-size bed in the middle and a small bedside table next to it. The bed looked comfortable, there where at least four pillows and a large blanket on it. The bedside table was empty except a small vial that stood on it. Madison looked at it. It didn’t look familiar to her. She felt a bit fearful uncorking it, but she trusted the room. It had never let her down before and she had asked for a sleeping draught. She gulped it down in one mouthful and sat on the bed. Wondering briefly, how long it would take her to fall asleep, she felt her arms and legs grow heavy. She laid down fully on the bed and tried to pull the blanket on herself, but keeping her eyes open became an impossible feat all of a sudden. She blinked a couple of times and then gave up.

She was standing in the mist again. The golden lines were in front of her. The mist swelled around her, but the path towards remained clear. She started walking in the direction of the shining light. She didn’t run this time. She knew what was waiting for her at the end of

the mist. Slowly and purposefully she moved on. The nearer she got, the clearer the lines where, forming a square Madison knew now to be the frame. She inspected the portrait very carefully, trying to find a way inside. The painting was empty, there was no one standing on the other side, only the background - a simple room with some furniture and a closed door. Madison raised her hand and tried to touch the surface of the painting. At the exact moment her hand reached the spot, where she would find the surface of the canvas, Jacob appeared in front of her. His manifestation was so sudden and sharp, that Madison jumped and backed away in haste. “Jacob!” she exclaimed.
“Sister.” Jacobs lips weren’t moving, but Madison heard his voice in her mind. “You’re here.”
“What is going on? Where are you? Where is Beatrice?” Madisons voice was shaking and she had to swallow to keep the tears away from her eyes.
“I can’t tell you all of this now. We don’t have much time. This connection will not last.” Jacob was surveying her with sadness in his eyes.
“Why? What can I do? How can I get you out?” Madison looked around, searching for something to help her. There was only opaque mist around her.
“You can do nothing now. You have to join me here, inside the painting to help.”
“But how?”
“There is a spell, you have to cast it on yourself in front of the portrait.”
“What spell?”
“Misceo pictura.”
“But why haven’t the teachers used it to get Beatrice out?” asked Madison bewildered.
“It is a spell I invented, no one else knows about it. That is how I got in here. But I need your help to get out.”
“But what about Beatrice? And the vaults? Is this part of another vault?”
“There is no time Madison. You have to wake up and use the spell. Once you are here, I will explain everything. Beatrice hasn’t got a lot of time, you have to hurry.” Jacob stepped back from Madison. “Cast the spell as soon as you can, and tell no one.”
“Why? Someone can help us, teachers or – “
“No! They can’t. Only you can help me. Others will only be in more danger. Come alone!”
Jacob backed away even further. The mist started to swell up around Madisons legs and she felt something pulling her backwards, or the painting was moving away from her, she didn’t know. The distance

between her and Jacob was growing.
“Wait! I don’t understand!” she yelled in desperation.
“Remember – misceo pictura. And come alone. I’m waiting for you little sister.”
Madison blinked and the mist surrounded her completely. Jacob, the painting, the golden lines – all were replaced by the gray mist. She waved her arms to make the mist dissolve around her, but was met with some sort of a soft texture. Thinking about the canvas of the portrait, she started to panic and struggle against it. It did not help her. On the contrary, she became fully enveloped by the fabric. She kicked hard with her feet and arched her back to free herself from the thing surrounding her. Suddenly she felt herself falling, then a sudden thud against her left eyebrow and an abrupt collision with something hard. She kicked and flailed her arms until the fabric loosened and fell off of her. She was lying on the floor of the room of requirements. Next to her was a gray blanket. She had fallen of the bed and hit her face against the bedside table. Rolling her eyes at herself she got up.

Next morning Madison left the dormitory at first light, eager to start the day. She tried to make sense of her dream the night before. She knew what she had to do now, but she felt uneasy and nervous. It felt wrong not to tell Dumbledore about her conversation with Jacob. On the other hand, Dumbledore wouldn’t let her try the spell on herself and Jacob had said, that only she could help him. Her chest felt heavy with pressure and she had a hard time concentrating on anything. During breakfast, she passed Penny in the hall. She halted abruptly, looking straight at her. Madison stopped as well, looking back at her with hope swelling in her chest. Penny looked scared and fragile, but also startled for some unknown reason. Then she shook her head lightly and walked on quickly. Madison sagged with disappointment. For one brief moment, she had thought that Penny would come and talk to her.
She sat down and placed her face between her hands. She knew she had to do it. There was no other way. If there was any chance at all, that she could help Beatrice and protect Penny and her friends, there was no time to lose. Telling Dumbledore would only complicate things and Jacob had said, that Beatrice didn’t have a lot of time. What that meant exactly, Madison didn’t let herself consider fully.
Tonks and Rowan sat on either sides of Madison.
“Hey there.” said Rowan placing a hand on her shoulder. “Are you ok?”
“Yeah, sure. What’s up?” said Madison, straightening up and quickly putting on a relaxed smile. She had no intention to reveal to her friends what she had learned the night before. The less they knew, the

better.
“Whoa! Who’d you fight with?” asked Tonks with raised eyebrows.
“What? I haven’t fought with no one.” answered Madison looking confused.
“What happened with your eye?” asked Rowan frowning.
“My eye? Nothing happened.” Madison raised her hand and touched her eyebrow. She hadn’t looked in the mirror for a while. “Is it bruised or something?”
“You can say that again. You look like you just stepped off the ring.”
“It must have happened yesterday when I was…training..” finished Madison lamely. “I must have hit myself.” She knew she didn’t sound convincing, but couldn’t think of anything else to say.
“Here.” said Rowan and pointed her wand at her face. Before Madison could react, she had cast the spell “Episkey.” Madison felt the skin around her left eyebrow contract and a slightly warm feeling spread on her face. She touched her eyebrow again. There was nothing there, no bump nor pain to be felt.
“Thanks Rowan.” she said relieved.
“No problem. Maybe someday you will tell me how it actually happened.” Rowan said quietly.
Madison blushed and looked down. “I will. Thanks again.”
“So. You made up with Penny already?” asked Tonks nudging Madison with her knee.
“Tonks.” said Rowan warningly.
“Cause she keeps staring at you like you’ve grown an extra head or something.” smiled Tonks looking at the Hufflepuff table.
Madison looked up at the same direction. Her eyes met Pennys briefly but the blonde haired girl blushed and looked away quickly.
“No. We haven’t made up.” sighed Madison, returning her gaze.
“I bet she wants to talk.” said Rowan. “You should find her after lunch and try to make up.”
“There’s no point Rowan. Beatrice is still trapped isn’t she. And it’s still my fault isn’t it. So what can I possibly say to her, that would make her feel better?” said Madison.
“She might feel differently, maybe she has calmed down a bit.”
“I don’t think so. I saw her yesterday and she didn’t even look at me. It’s not the time. Drop it.”
“Alright fine.” huffed Rowan.
“What about a quidditch match after lessons Madison? I got Bill, Charlie, Tulip and Diego to join up for a friendly. Want to come?” asked Tonks clearly trying to change the subject.
“I’m sorry I can’t. I’m…er…I have to study.” Madison made a mental note to try and learn how to lie more convincingly. Rowan looked at her skeptically and Tonks just smiled. “Right-o. Suite yourself. The

invitation is open if you change your mind though." she got up and strolled away.
"Studying are you?" asked Rowan suspiciously.
"Yes I am." said Madison trying to sound confident and casual.
Rowan didn't say anything for a little while. Madison refilled her pumpkin juice and took another piece of toast.
"Madison?" said Rowan quietly.
"What?"
"Whatever it is, that is going on with you – just be careful ok?"
Madison looked at her best friend. She wanted to confide everything to her, to ask her advice and help in casting the spell and entering the painting. At the same time she knew she could not risk it, she had been leaning on her friends too much already. This was her doing and tonight she would try and make it right.
"I will Rowan, don't worry, everything's fine."

Chapter 9

Madison sneaked out of the room of requirements about half an hour after midnight. She had been hiding there, waiting for the inhabitants of the castle to fall asleep. Rowan and Tulip rarely stayed awake on the nights she was training so she knew they wouldn't worry about her absence.

Madison moved quietly along the corridors. She had broken this particular school rule many times before, but every time she was lurking in the dark castle, her heart was pounding in her ears and her palms were clutching her wand tightly. She didn't like the quiet of the castle, every sound was magnified, every creak thundered in her ears. Fortunately she reached the second floors staircase without meeting anyone else. The portrait wasn't empty. Beatrice was sleeping in the corner of the room depicted in the painting. She looked even smaller than usual, curled up in a ball. Madison felt pangs of sympathy towards the little girl. She could only imagine how confused and scared she must feel.

This sight bolstered Madisons resolve and she stood straightly in front of the painting and took out her wand. Taking a deep breath, she pointed the wand at herself and said quietly but clearly "Misceo Pictura."

For a brief moment she thought, that she had messed it up and the spell had not worked. But then she felt herself starting to change. She had never felt like this before and found it hard to comprehend the feeling. It didn't hurt, but felt rather peculiar, like she was dissolving. She looked down and saw herself become fragmented and cracked, lines appearing on her skin and clothes. At the same time a strong pull was emanating from the wall. She levitated from the ground and her body rose to the same height as the portrait. She tried to move her arms, but found that she was unable to do so. For what seemed like an eternity to Madison, but more likely was only a minute or less, her body levitated in the air above the staircase. Frozen in mid-air, she looked at the portrait in front of her and at the little girl sleeping in the corner. WHOOSH! Her body was hurled against the painting and she instinctively tried to brace for the impact with the wall, but it never came. She had a sudden feeling of having passed under an icy cold waterfall and then she was standing in the stony room next to sleeping Beatrice Haywood. When she looked behind her, she saw a portrait of Hogwarts staircase, like a window back to the school. The spell had worked, she was inside.

"Beatrice!" Madison fell on her knees next to the sleeping girl. "Wake up Beatrice." The girl stirred and opened her eyes. They were exactly

like Pennys, thought Madison, bright blue and sparkling. Beatrice looked at Madison and her eyes went round, panic seeping into them. Wide awake now, she was pressing herself against the wall, as far away from Madison as she could.
"Where did you come from? Who are you?"
"Calm down, I'm here to help. I'm a student in Hogwarts like you. I'm not going to hurt you."
"How did you get in?"
"I cast a spell in front of the painting."
"Do you know how to get out again?"
"Not yet. Come on, let's have a look around." said Madison and stood up, reaching a hand down at Beatrice to help her up.
"Why should I come with you? How can I trust you?" asked Beatrice looking up at her hesitantly.
"I promise you, that I want to help. I know your sister Penny. We're..er..we're friends." Madison thought it best to skip the latest developments in Penny and hers relationship. Beatrice relaxed visibly at the mention of Penny. "You know my sister? Did she send you?"
"Sort of" said Madison looking around nervously. She had a feeling in the back of her neck, that they were being watched. "Listen, we have to move, we don't have much time. We have to find my brother and get the hell out of here."
"Your brother?"
"Yeah, Jacob. His stuck in here too, have you seen him?" asked Madison.
To her surprise Beatrice got up quickly and backed away from her to the other side of the room. "You're his sister? You're Madison Steward? I'm not going anywhere with you!"
"What? What's wrong?" Madison moved nearer to Beatrice and held up her arms. "I want to help."
But Beatrice recoiled from her "Get away from me!" This was so reminiscent of her older sister, that Madison stopped dead and just looked at her dumbfounded. She had no idea why Beatrice was acting this way. "OK. OK. I won't come closer. Could you just tell me, what happened? Have you seen Jacob? How did you get stuck inside here anyway? I mean, I cast a spell on myself, but you..."
"She's here because of you Madison." said a quiet voice from behind her. Madison jumped and aimed her wand quickly. Her brother was standing near the door on the other side of the room. He had entered so quietly, that neither Madison or Beatrice had heard him.
"Jacob?" Madison lowered her wand. "Is it really you? Are you really here or am I dreaming again?"
Jacob smirked "It's really me little sister. I knew you would find me."
Madison let out a half-laugh, half sob and threw herself at her brother.

She felt such a burden lifting from her, that she hadn't been aware of carrying it around. All the years that had passed after Jacob went missing formed a single blurred and pulsating ball of longing inside her and the only thing that shined brightly in her mind was her brothers face. She hugged him tightly and didn't bother holding back the tears that now fell freely from her eyes. She could feel his heartbeat against her chest and felt his familiar shape around her – protective and homely at the same time. That was the feeling, she understood for the first time while hugging Jacob – he was home for Madison. Not her parents house, not even Hogwarts. Jacob was her home. When she finally let go of him, she realized, that he had stopped hugging her some time ago. He looked at her, smiling slightly.
"Jacob." sighed Madison "I can't believe I finally found you. I've been looking for you for so long, I had begun giving up hope."
"Not lately though sister." said Jacob looking at her, his head tilted. "You haven't been looking for me for many months now, haven't you?"
"I.." Madison looked at Jacob. Was he angry? Disappointed?
"I promised Dumbledore I wouldn't. He was worried about me because of the vaults. I'm so sorry Jacob."
"No matter little sister. Dumbledore could not come between us."
Madison frowned at Jacob. "I don't think that was his intention."
Behind them Beatrice made a sound like a whimper. Madison turned to face her. "Don't worry Beatrice, we'll get out of here soon now. My brother and I will – "
"She will not leave this place again Madison." said Jacob in a frigid voice.
"What do you mean?" asked Madison looking at him.
"Well you see, that's the price we have to pay for Dumbledores meddling. I brought her here because I needed you. It was the only thing I could think of. And it turns out Dumbledore did us a favor."
"You brought her here? Why? What has she got to do with any of this?" asked Madison apprehensively.
"You see, when I got stuck inside this vault, I knew at once, that I couldn't get out of here myself. This vault is special, I was foolish to enter it alone, but...anyway, I was sure you would come. And I was right, I felt you searching for me almost at once. Until Dumbledore ordered you to stay away. And then I knew, that I had to do something. I had to get your attention somehow, get your focus back to what was important. You proved to be harder to reach as time passed. I felt your mind fill with meaningless things like your friends and dances. And a girl..." Jacob smiled slyly. "A blond haired girl filled the space in your thoughts, that should have been reserved for me. Then I knew what to do. Pulling someone in here against their will takes a lot of effort Madison. I couldn't drag just anyone in here. They

had to be weak, powerless. Your mudblood crush was too strong for me, but her little sister...well she was just perfect. I knew you would come to rescue her just as you would have done, if I had taken her sister. And I was right. Here you are at last!" Jacob sounded triumphant.

Madison stood speechless. She looked at Jacob properly for the first time. He looked the same as he had done since she had seen him last. But something was different. He had always had a haughty demeanour, but now his eyes were callous, almost emotionless. Madison started to feel a bit nauseous. "Do you mean to say, that the only reason, you brought Beatrice here, was to contact me?" she asked slowly.
"Well at first yes. But there appears to be another use for her I did not foresee before. Two birds one stone you might say." he answered smiling grimly at Madison. "As I said – this vault is special. That's why I needed you here in the first place. One can't leave this place on his own. The portrait operates as a reflection of the world, like a mirror image. The powers of one wizard fall short, I needed you – my little sister, my mirror image to join me."
Jacob looked at Madison intently. "You and I together will have the power to break out from here and reach the other vaults. Oh Madison, if you had felt the power I have felt. Unimaginable, inconceivable energy. Magic like you have never felt before. And we can reach it, we can master it together. I was foolish not to ask you to join me from the start. I'm sorry for that. But you can come with me now, we can change everything together." Jacob was speaking faster, with urgency. He stepped closer to Madison and she saw, that his eyes were brimming with something dark, that scared her.
"But Beatrice? Why can't she leave this place?" asked Madison looking at Beatrice who was watching them both with her mouth slightly open, pressing herself against the wall.
"She will be dead." said Jacob matter-of-factly.
"What!" yelled Madison. Beatrice whimpered again and Madison made a move to comfort her. That made Beatrice cry out loud.
"What do you mean?" asked Madison backing away from the little girl in an attempt to ease her.
"That is the beauty of it all. We will join forces and break this vault by killing her. That will be our sacrifice to the vault. It needs one, I can tell. An absolute offering, a life."
"You..you..you've gone mad Jacob." sputtered Madison. "You can't be serious. We can't kill anyone. I won't kill anyone. And you..are you joking?"
Jacob looked at her with understanding. "I figured you might react

that way. You always were sentimental Madison. Even when we were little and you wanted to go and play with the muggles in the village. You haven't realized yet, as I have, that there is a bigger picture. You have not seen the power that is out there. You have only experienced the mundane – school, our parents, your friends, teenage infatuations. All of it is inconsequential. It is irrelevant. But I promise you, join me now and I will show you the true world. You will know magic you could not even dream about."

Madison could not believe her ears. Her brother, who had taught her to play quidditch, who had read to her when she couldn't fall asleep, who had shielded her from the coldness of her parents. He was standing before her asking her to murder a small girl with him. This simply could not be. There had to be a mistake somewhere. This was not Jacob, some dark wizard had drunk polyjuice potion or..something..anything.
"Jacob. You can't mean it. You are not capable of murder. We can't do this. You have just been here too long and the vault is affecting your mind or something."
Jacob shook his head slowly. "No sister. My mind has never been this clear before. You have to understand, there is nothing to discuss – it is us or her. If we don't kill her, we won't get out of here. And I will not stay here a minute longer than I have to."
"But if we wait, the teachers, Dumbledore can – "
"No they can't." yelled Jacob, starting to sound impatient. "They can not. The only reason you could enter was me. I tricked the vault into taking you. But enough talking. Let's do this now and then I can show you what lies ahead for us." Jacob moved closer to Madison and pointed his wand at Beatrice. "Say it with me sister, we'll see what the Stewards are capable of."
Beatrice sank to the ground and looked at them both wide-eyed, mute with terror.

"Are you mad!" the sight of Beatrice made Madison livid. She pushed her brother away from the little girl. He stumbled back a few steps, but made no move to return. "Can you not see what you are doing to her? She is terrified! Can you hear the things you are saying? You sound psychotic, demented."
"It is hard at first I can imagine, but you should know better Madison. What does a life of a single mudblood matter in the greater scheme of things. With the powers of the vaults at our disposal we can shape the world how we want it. If you are worried about your silly crush, then we can just change her memories and be done with it. Do not get stuck on some worthless details, you are smarter than this Madison."
Madison punched her brother in the face. She had completely

forgotten her wand, reacting out of a primal instinct. "Stop it. Shut up! This can't be, this is not you Jacob. Shut up!" She started to hit him again, but he flicked his wand and a silver shield erupted between them. This made Madison remember her own wand. She looked at her hand and time seemed to stand still as she raised her hand to point her wand at her brother. This was surreal, she had the urge to laugh out loud at the absurdity of it all, the only reason she didn't was an other strong urge to vomit. Slowly she raised her wand and stood between Beatrice and Jacob. "I will not let you hurt her." she said, sounding much more confident than she felt.

Chapter 10

They stood facing each other for what felt like an age. The only sound was the quiet whimpering of Beatrice, who was hunched in the corner behind Madison. Jacobs shield dissolved between them but he made no attempt at casting another one.
“So this is how it’s going to be?” asked Jacob quietly. “You choose some random mudblood over your own brother?”
“Stop calling her a mudblood!” said Madison angrily.
“Why? She is one isn’t she? Why can’t I call her one then? Are you worried about her feelings? You raise your wand against me, your own brother and yet you worry about her feelings? Hers Madison? What about me? Do you forsake me so easily? Have you no feelings for me at all?”
Madisons hand started to shake. Fresh tears started falling down her cheeks. “Jacob. Please! Please put down your wand and let’s just talk.”
“There is nothing to talk about anymore, don’t you see that. I’ve explained it all to you. I can not leave this place without a sacrifice. She is the sacrifice Madison. You have to help me kill her or you sentence me to die in this place. It is your choice.”
“Please don’t” whispered Beatrice almost inaudibly from the corner.
“Do you remember when we played chess in the garden house during the thunder storm Madison? You were scared and wanted to go inside, but I wouldn’t let you. Do you remember what I said to you then?”
“Stewards finish what they start.” whispered Madison, her hand trembling worse than ever.
“And we did. We finished that game and we will finish the search for the vaults together. Look at me Madison.” Jacob said almost pleading. “We together, we will finish this. It will be over before you know it and you will forget about her.”
Madison took a deep shaky breath, closed her eyes for a moment and then raised her hand higher, holding her wand firmly.
“I was scared Jacob. I wanted to go inside, but you wouldn’t let me. All I wanted was to be with you, to make you proud of me. But you? You wanted to win that game. You had to finish that game for yourself. And now? You have to win again don’t you Jacob? I’m not a little girl anymore, I’m not following you blindly this time.”
Jacob raised his wand also, his eyes turned a shade darker and his voice sounded calmer. “This is it? You want to fight me? This is your choice sister?”
“There is no choice!” bellowed Madison. “I have already lost. Can’t you see that? You think I have a choice between you and her? I have already lost you.” Madison straightened herself and wiped her eyes

quickly with the back of her free arm. “But I can still try and save her...and myself.”

Jacob moved so quickly, that Madison could barely manage to cast a protego charm in front of her and Beatrice. His spell was strong, Madison staggered backwards when the diluted force from it rushed through her shield. Before she was ready, Jacob had sent another spell at them. This time Madison had no time to cast and ducked to avoid it. Jacob was moving closer and Madison stood up quickly. “Protego!” she yelled. A silver cloud hovered in front of her. Jacob smirked and waved his wand almost casually. Her charm faded instantly.
“Protego!” she yelled again panicking. She was backing away from Jacob, nearer to Beatrice who was now standing directly behind her. Jacob looked around and waved his wand high above his head. Small red sparks appeared around his head. He lowered his wand quickly and the red sparks moved like bullets towards Madison and Beatrice.
“Protego max–” bellowed Madison, but she was too late. Some of the sparks lingered behind her first shield, but others rushed through. One of them hit her right above the left knee. She felt a sharp pain, like a knife had pierced her leg and sensed blood seeping inside her jeans. Behind her Beatrice wailed loudly.
Shivers ran through Madison and she yelled again “Expelliarmus!” Jacob blocked her spell and pointed his wand straight at her.
“Crucio.” Madison felt pain like none she had ever felt before. She fell to the ground, her wand slipping from her hand. She cried out loud, every bone in her body felt like they were cracking into tiny pieces, her skin was on fire. This was it, she was dying, she had to be. And just as suddenly, the pain stopped. Madison was lying spread-eagled on the ground shaking, her leg bleeding violently. She felt the urge to vomit again, but swallowed profusely to prevent it.
“Maybe you were right dear sister. I might have overestimated your powers. I thought that our common blood meant that you had the same potential in you, the same talent. But seeing you now I understand that I was mistaken. I don’t need you to kill her. Two lives will be more than enough to satisfy the vault. I will make my own destiny without you.” Jacob raised both of his hands above his head. A large arrow shaped red light appeared above him. “You will be my first sacrifice little mudblood.” He dropped both of his arms suddenly and the red light shot through the air towards Beatrice. Madison didn’t have time to think, she didn’t have her wand, it had rolled away from her hand. She jumped up and threw herself in front of Beatrice. The red light hit her straight in the abdomen. She fell back with the force of the spell and stumbled to the ground next to Beatrice.

The light had disappeared, but her t-shirt was in shreds and blood pulsated from her stomach openly to the stone floor. Jacob halted for a second and then shook his head smiling. “You idiot” he said. “You only prolong the –” Suddenly he stopped and looked up. Madison tried to get up, but managed only to back herself against the wall in a half-sitting position. Something was happening around them. It felt like an earthquake, the floor started to shake and dust was falling from the ceiling.
“What?” whispered Jacob to himself. The rumbling grew louder, a stone fell from the beam behind Jacob. “This can not be. There has been no–” But Jacob had to jump to avoid another stone. Madison looked around in disbelief. What now? Was this the vault opening or was someone trying to get inside the painting from outside. She had no clue. She felt only panic about Beatrice and herself being buried under the rubble falling from above them. Quickly while Jacob was dodging the falling debris, she tried to search for her wand. Moving was painful, she could only crawl, hunched and holding one hand on her stomach, groping around with her other hand. Beatrice seamed to understand what she was doing and before Madison could stop her, she had jumped up from beside her and ducking her head, she ran to get her wand. Jacob didn’t look at them. He stared at the ceiling in confusion and yelled looking up. “You didn’t let me finish! This is not it.”
Beatrice ran back to Madison and pressed her wand into her hand. Madison gave her a fleeting look and saw innocent blue eyes staring back at her, filled with terror. She raised her wand and pointed it at her brother once more. “Expelliarmus!”
Jacobs wand flew out of his hand. He flailed his arm to catch it, but missed narrowly. He turned and advanced upon them, his eyes full of wrath. Feet from reaching them, a large boulder fell between them, hitting Madisons injured leg. A dull crack sounded among the crashes of stones and debris falling and Madison rather heard than felt her leg brake. Second later a violent pain blasted in her shin and Madison cried out loud. Beatrice clutched her hand tightly, trembling. Sweat pouring down her face, Madison held her wand in front of her, determined to fight until her last breath. The boulder had made Jacob jump back and he had stumbled. Looking around at them wildly, a large vein pulsating on his forehead, he spat. “To hell with you both.” He made a jump towards the door and reaching it, tore it open, disappearing behind it.
Madison closed her eyes, but Beatrice was tugging her hand furiously. “Come on! We have to move.” Madison looked at her in confusion. Where did she think they could go. After Jacob? But Beatrice was pulling her towards the painting of Hogwarts. Madison tried to get up,

but couldn't steady herself on her broken leg. Her vision was dimming, the edges of her sight were starting to grew blurry.
“Go on, you go.” she pushed Beatrice away from her. “No!” she yelled back at her fiercely. “Come on! You can do it!” Madison mustered her last strength and started crawling towards the painting, Beatrice pulling her with all the might of an eleven year old. They reached the painting, scratched and bruised from the rubble still falling. Panting heavily now, Madison got on her good knee, her other leg lying at an odd angle, bleeding from where Jacobs arrow had pierced it. She held one hand on her abdomen, trying in vain to slow the bleeding and her other hand was clasped with Beatrices. “Go on! Try it!” Madison yelled over the noise. Beatrice reached out her free arm and touched the portrait hanging in front of them. As soon as her hand had made contact with the painting, Madison felt herself levitate up from the floor. The room around them stopped shaking, the air was filled with stones and pieces of wood, suspended in mid-air and small clouds of dust were frozen near the floor. Her hand was stuck inside Beatrices and neither of them were able to move. After a couple of seconds, they were both hurled at the portrait and fell into darkness.

Everything was silent around them. Madison tried to move. She could, although she quickly decided not to, every part of her body was aching. She groped around for Beatrice and felt her lie next to her. Madison opened her eyes and looked around. They were at Hogwarts, on the stairs. It seamed, that the portrait had spat them out. Beatrice was getting to her feet. Madison tried to follow her, but fell back instantly, fresh spurts of blood flowed from her stomach. No matter, she thought to herself. They were safe now. She could close her eyes and rest. Beatrice can go back to Penny. She smiled to herself when the image of Penny swam before her dimming eyes. Everything was going to be ok.

Chapter 11

A bright light forced Madison to open her eye. She really didn't want to, she felt like she had only just fallen asleep. Cracking one eye open, she saw that the light came from a nearby window. Madison opened her other eye as well and looked around. Two things became apparent to her instantly. She was not in her bed at Gryffindor tower and she should never move her head ever again. A splitting headache was throbbing around her temples and she closed her eyes again quickly. Lying very still, she tried to remember how she got there.
The last thing she remembered was being hurled out of the painting on the second floor staircases. She must have passed out after that. She squinted and tried very slowly to see if Beatrice was also there. She understood now, that she was in the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey must have been in her office, because the infirmary was empty except for Madison.
She closed her eyes again to shield them from the light and tried to take stock of her injuries. Her left leg felt fine aside from a twinge of pain above her knee. Madam Pomfrey must have fixed her broken bone instantly. Her abdomen however was tender and sore. She groped around the spot where Jacobs spell had hit her and felt bandages. This wound must have been harder to heal. At the same moment Madam Pomfrey entered the room from her office. Striding past Madison she glanced at her and stopped abruptly.
"Oh miss Steward! You're awake! Thank Merlin!"
"Morning." said Madison hoarsely. It felt like she hadn't spoken for a long time. Her throat was very dry and her tongue felt stiff.
"Here, have some water." Madam Pomfrey came to her bedside in a hurry and after handing her a glass of water started examining Madison.
"Thanks" gasped Madison and drank the water gratefully. Her head cleared considerably and she made a move to rise a bit from her lying position.
"No no dear. Don't try to move yet. Your wounds are not fully healed. Although we might make more progress now that you are awake." said Madam Pomfrey and pushed her back down firmly.
"What happened? Is Beatrice ok?"
"She's fine. She had no lasting injuries, some cuts and bruises healed and a couple of nights of dreamless sleep was all she needed."
"Couple of nights? How long have I been here?" wondered Madison.
"Three days."
"Three days?" croaked Madison.
"Yes. We had already organized transport to St. Mungos for this

afternoon had you not woken up."
Madison leaned back and let Madam Pomfrey fuss around her. She mumbled approvingly after checking underneath her bandages.
"Very good miss Steward. How are you feeling, any nausea?"
"No, I feel fine. Tired mostly."
"That is to be expected. I will administer some dreamless sleep potion to you first thing, but I must inform the headmaster that you have woken up. He instructed me to send for him at once." Madam Pomfrey left the infirmary at a brisk pace.
Madison closed her eyes once more. Her headache was slowly subsiding and she felt rather comfortable. She was on the brink of falling asleep again, when the doors opened and Albus Dumbledore strode in, followed by Madam Pomfrey. She continued on to her office, closing the door after her, but Dumbledore took a seat next to Madisons bed.
"Good Morning miss Steward. I'm very happy to see you awake." said Dumbledore beaming at Madison.
"Thank you professor." answered Madison quietly.
"Your friends will be very relieved. They have been extremely worried about you. They have hardly left your side for the past three days." Madison gave Dumbledore a small smile.
"You have gone through an extraordinary ordeal. How are you feeling?" asked Dumbledore.
Madison stayed quiet for a while. The truth was, she had no idea how she was feeling. There seemed to be too many emotions to pick from and on the whole, she didn't feel any of them acutely. Mostly she felt numb and tired.
"Have you spoken to Beatrice about what happened?" she asked Dumbledore, avoiding his question.
Dumbledore didn't seem to mind. "Yes, miss Haywood has told me everything she knows."
"I'm sorry that I didn't come to you first." said Madison looking at Dumbledore. "My brother told me in my dream, that I shouldn't, that others would be in more danger."
"And he was quite right. It's safe to say now, that anyone else but you entering the portrait would have been catastrophic. I can't say, that I approve your behavior, but I commend your reasons behind it. As I have said to you before – the heart of ones actions matter greatly."
"My brother...he...he wanted to kill Beatrice." Hearing herself, an immense shame overcame Madison and the numbness she had felt since waking up started to dissolve, leaving her nerves raw and her head swimming in confusion.
"He wanted me to help him kill her. He said that the vault needed a sacrifice." Madison spoke to her hands on the bed, she didn't dare

look at Dumbledore.
“Yes, I know. Miss Haywood informed me. She also told me what you said to your brother. How you protected her from him.”
Dumbledore looked at Madison intently. “Do you know why the vault was destroyed Madison?”
Madison shook her head. “No. Jacob said, that it needed a life, but no one was –“
“Your brother was lying to you about that precise detail.” Madison looked up at him sharply.
“What do you mean?”
“Your brother had spent quite a lot of time in the vault prior to your arrival. And this particular vault was special. It did not operate on the principles of strength and power. It drew its greatest dangers from the people inside it.”
“I don’t understand professor.”
“The powers in the portrait vault did require a sacrifice, your brother told you the truth about that. But the sacrifice was never meant to be a life. The sacrifice, for lack of a better term, was someones heart.”
Madison only stared at Dumbledore, her mouth open.
“You see, your brother tricked you into entering the vault, because he needed you as his sacrifice. He intended to persuade you to help him kill an innocent and by doing so losing your heart, losing your self so to speak. You and your very being were meant as a sacrifice to the vault.”
“But I still don’t understand. I didn’t help him kill anyone. Why was the vault destroyed then?”
“Because the vault got another sacrifice instead. You.”
Madison was beginning to think Dumbledore was messing with her on purpose. “Huh? What?”
“You threw yourself in front of your brothers spell to save miss Haywood. You were willing to sacrifice yourself and in doing so you gave up what was dearest to you – your brother. Your pure intention was what caused the vault to collapse.”
Madison sighed. All of this was too much for her. Her headache was starting to reemerge.
“But how could Jacob think, that I would kill for him?” she asked Dumbledore pleadingly.
“It is my belief, that your brothers mind has been affected by the magic in the vaults. He has spent the better part of his youth consumed by them, both figuratively and literally I’m afraid. He was always prone to overestimate the importance of power and bloodlines” Madison hung her head again “and this gave him confidence in thinking you could be wooed by the same attributes. Persuading you, he stressed on your relation and the powers you could

hold. In doing so, he underestimated you immensely. I must once again quote myself – you, Madison, are driven not by your mind and will, but by your heart. And that has made all the difference."

Madison looked at Dumbledore sitting next to her. "But sir, how do you know all of this?"
Dumbledore sighed, suddenly looking graver than before. "After we found you and miss Haywood on the stairs and I had listened to her account of what had passed, I returned to the portrait. Since you had destroyed the vaults magic, I could enter it with no danger."
"You know how to do that? I thought my brother had invented the spell?" asked Madison in wonder.
"Your brothers spell was not the first of its kind. What kept me and any other but yourself from entering, was the vaults magic. Part of its modus operandi was to concentrate on its inhabitants. I entered the remains of the vault to inspect the sight and learn what I could."
Dumbledore paused for a moment. "Madison, I found your brother unconscious in the adjoining room. He is alive and at present resides in St. Mungos hospital."
Madison looked at Dumbledores face. It started to get blurry for some reason. She wondered briefly, if she was going to pass out again when she realized, that her eyes were swimming in tears. She frowned and squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. Taking short breaths, she willed herself to stop crying and opened her eyes at Dumbledore once more.
"How...how is he?"
"He is physically well, he suffered no major injuries in the vaults. But he is under restraint. St. Mungos healers are evaluating the effects of the vaults to his mind. Your parents have been notified and I am told, that they have been there to visit him."
"Can I visit him too?" asked Madison feeling guilty all of a sudden.
Dumbledore looked at her closely and smiled widely.
"Of course you can. Once you yourself are fully healed that is."
Dumbledore stood up. "I know there are more questions you want to ask me, and I'm perfectly willing to answer them, but I promised Madam Pomfrey, that I would not keep you up for too long. You have undergone considerable trauma and need rest. Not to mention, that I have no doubt given you a lot to reflect on."

Chapter 12

Madam Pomfrey returned soon after Dumbledore had gone. She had mixed four different potions for Madison to drink. Dreamless sleep potion was the last one she gulped down. Madam Pomfrey also changed her bandages and puffed up her pillows for her. Murmuring her thanks, Madison drifted back to sleep. When she woke the second time, it was evening time and she was not alone. Rowan was sitting next to her, surrounded by books and pieces of parchment.
"Hi." said Madison, still a bit groggy.
Rowan looked up from her book sharply. "Madison! You're awake. How are you feeling?"
"Ok. Better than this morning for sure." answered Madison shifting around gingerly.
"Great. That's good." said Rowan nodding to herself and looking at the ground instead of Madison. An awkward silence fell between them.
"Are you ok?" asked Madison timidly.
"Sure, why wouldn't I be? I'm not the one, who got gutted in a cursed vault did I." said Rowan with eerie jauntiness.
"Rowan.." started Madison carefully.
"I mean I wasn't sucked inside a painting and didn't almost die. That was YOU. So I'd say, that me, I'm doing excellent." said Rowan, her voice growing steadily louder.
"The only tiny thing is, that my best friend in the whole world almost died. And she didn't trust me enough to help her. So there's that. So maybe I'm not doing so fine after all Madison." finished Rowan, full on yelling at her now. She exhaled deeply and leaned back in her chair.
"You almost died Madison. I'm not fine, I'm furious with you." she said quietly looking at Madison with sadness.
"I know Rowan. I'm sorry I didn't tell you what was going on. I was afraid." said Madison looking anxiously at Rowan.
"Friends are supposed to help each other, to trust each other. I thought we shared more than a dorm room." said Rowan.
"We do!" said Madison a little desperately. "Rowan please. I'm so sorry. I just...I was ashamed." she said blushing.
"Of what?" asked Rowan surprised.
"Of myself. And my brother. It was all our fault – the painting, the vaults, Beatrice. And I had dragged you along with me on my search for the vaults for years. I didn't want you to be in any danger because of me ever again." finished Madison quietly.
"Wow! Pennys words really got to you didn't they? Well for one thing – you didn't 'drag me along' as you said, I wanted to help you from the start. I went with you on your search because it was the right thing to

do and because you are my friend. And so did all the others – all of us came because we wanted to help make this school a safer place and because we trusted you Madison. Secondly – you have to let Pennys words go. I know for a fact, that she regrets them immensely. She said them in anger and fear. Her little sister had just been trapped inside a painting for Merlins sake! She lashed out, she didn't mean them."
"Really?" asked Madison hesitantly.
"Really." sighed Rowan.
"I'm sorry Rowan. I'm really really sorry." said Madison pleadingly.
"I'm sorry too. I didn't mean to yell at you. I was just worried." said Rowan in a calmer voice.
"So are we..are we OK?" asked Madison uneasily.
Rowan got up and smirked at Madison. "We're OK." she leaned down and hugged Madison carefully. Madison embraced her back, feeling relief and comfort at the same time.
"But if you ever do something so colossally idiotic like that again" said Rowan mid-hug into her ear "in Merlins name, I will jinx you into oblivion myself Madison Steward!"
Madison pulled back from the hug and sighed in relief. "I won't, I promise."
Rowan sat back down on the chair next to Madisons bed.
"You missed some homework, but don't worry, I brought you my notes, we can go over them once you are feeling better."
"Thanks a lot." said Madison distractedly. "Err..by the way...how do you know that Penny didn't mean what she said to me?" she asked trying to sound as if she didn't care about the answer.
Rowan gave her an amused look. "She told me. She came to talk with me right after you left the great hall. She wanted to know what happened with your eye. She was worried. And she told me that she had been regretting her words ever since she said them. She was really miserable."
Madison heaved a heavy sigh. "Well she must be better now. Beatrice is OK, isn't she."
Rowan looked at her "I think she won't feel better until the two of you talk." Madison didn't say anything, but nodded.
"Madison? What happened with your brother?" asked Rowan cautiously. "Beatrice said, that he ran out of the room you were in. Did he get away or...Do you know?"
"Yes, I know. Dumbledore came to see me this morning after I woke up." Madison recited her conversation with the headmaster to Rowan, leaving nothing out. Just when she reached the end, the door to the infirmary opened with a loud bang and in came Tulip, Tonks, Ben, Charlie and Barnaby.
"Wotcher Madison! Finally awake I see." said Tonks beaming at her.

"You look loads better Madison." smiled Tulip.
"How are you?" asked Charlie.
Madison smiled at all of them. "Hi guys! I'm fine. Thanks!"
"So you really fought your brother in a cursed vault?" asked Barnaby expectantly.
Tulip shoved an elbow into Barnabys side. "For Merlin's sake Barnaby! Ease into it why don't you."
Barnaby rubbed his side "What? I thought we'd get over the erumpent in the room quickly."
Madison laughed. "It's fine Tulip, I don't mind."
"So we can ask you about it?" asked Charlie looking eager.
"Yes. I just recently learned how stupid I'd been to keep stuff from my friends. So ask away." said Madison, giving Rowan a side glance. The next hour or so she recounted every detail of the story. She told them about her dreams, about the vault and Beatrice. Talking about her brother, she felt her cheeks flush a bit, but her friends only gasped and exclaimed, showing no signs of disdain or accusation.
Every word Madison uttered made her feel lighter. The vast desolation that had filled her ever since she realized what Jacob wanted her to do to Beatrice, started to dwindle and instead, she felt warmth blossom in her chest. Her friends stayed for hours after she had finished her story. They talked about schoolwork and the aftermath of Beatrices trapping.
"The whole school has been buzzing about it. They talk about nothing but you and your brother. But they get most of the details wrong." said Ben.
"Great." said Madison glumly.
"Don't worry, it will die down soon enough." said Tulip consolingly.
"Yeah, and I can practice my mimblewimble jinx on the chatter-boxes until then." said Tonks cheerfully.
"What about your parents Madison? Are they coming to visit you?" asked Charlie. Rowan made a tutting sound and frowned.
"I don't think so. They are in St. Mungos with my brother." said Madison feeling embarrassed again. Luckily for her, at that moment Madam Pomfrey entered and started bustling everyone towards the exit.
"It is almost curfew time. She needs rest and sleep. You can come back tomorrow" she said sternly. "Preferably one at a time." she added.

Madison had to stay in the hospital wing for three more days. Time passed painstakingly slow. She did her homework and Madam Pomfrey administered several potions a day to her. Her stomach felt better by the hour. She could move around the room slowly, a bit hunched, but still. Madam Pomfrey had warned her, that she would

have scars on both her abdomen and above her knee, but Madison didn't really care. She felt very lucky to have survived the vault at all, what were a couple of scars compared to that.
Beatrice Haywood came to see her the next day after she woke. She hugged her tightly and sat by her bed. Madison was really happy to see her, but could not help be disappointed, that she wasn't joined by her big sister. She chatted with Beatrice for a while, trying to find the right moment to ask about Penny, but couldn't drum up the courage. She swore at herself silently, but smiled when Beatrice complained to her, that all of her classmates were calling her Mona Lisa now. On her way out Beatrice promised to visit again soon and said "oh, and I don't know why you and my sister aren't talking, but could you like make up pronto please? It is really tiresome to watch her mope around all the time."
"Bye Mona!" called Madison.

The next evening Madison was writing an essay for potions class. Rowan had brought her all of her school books and she was trying to keep up with her homework. Snape wouldn't care that she had missed a weeks worth of lessons and she really didn't want to give him a reason to deduct house points from her when she returned to class. She heard the door closing and looked up. Penny stood next to the doorway, looking like she was deciding if she would dare move further into the room. Madisons heart started to beat very fast all of a sudden.
"Hi." she said quietly to Penny.
Penny looked at her. Her blue eyes were watery and wide. "Hi." she whispered. She moved slowly nearer to Madison and stood next to her bed. "How are you feeling?"
"Fine, good as new." Madison offered a hesistant smile. "How about you?"
Penny sat down at the edge of the seat next to Madison. "Me? I feel like the biggest jerk there ever was. Oh Madison, I am so sorry about the things I said to you after we saw Beatrice. I didn't mean any of them. I..I didn't think, all I could see in my mind was my little sister in that horrible place and I..I just lost it. I would take it all back if I could, I swear. I'm so so sorry. Beatrice told me everything that happened in the vault, how you fought your brother and how you jumped in front of that spell and how you protected her. If I think how close you came to...I can't even imagine what I would...and if you had been, I would never...I was so worried about you when you didn't wake up, I don't think I slept the whole time. I should have come straight away to apologize, but I was scared and ashamed and-and-and...I'm sorry Madison." Penny finished, slightly winded from her

long speech.
Madison blinked and looked at Penny. She didn't like seeing her so distraught. "It's ok." she said soothingly. "I understand why you said all those things. I'm sorry too. I'm sorry about my brother and about Beatrice getting involved and..."
"Please don't." said Penny quietly. "Please don't apologize. You saved her life Madison."
"Well how about this then" said Madison placing her hand in front of Penny. She took it between both of her own instantly. "How about we both stop apologizing and just forget this...er...thing ever happened?" asked Madison hopefully.
Penny looked at her, eyes full of astonishment. "You, Madison Steward, are simply amazing!" she got up and came to hug her.
Madison felt her cheeks flush a bit and her heart thumped so loudly, she was afraid that Penny would feel it.
Leaning back slightly from the hug Penny remained bent over her face. She laid one of her hands against Madisons cheek and whispered looking straight into her eyes "But I won't forget." then she kissed her other cheek softly and sat back down.
Madison let out a breath she didn't know she was holding and felt her heart now pounding somewhere near her throat. Her cheek tingled and the ghost of Pennys lips lingered on it. Her chest felt like it was going to burst and she grinned sheepishly unable to control herself. Penny looked rather crimson herself.
"So, how's Mona?" asked Madison to break the tension. Penny laughed out loud and her unrestrained, joyous laughter echoed in the empty infirmary, spreading around them both like a flood of happiness.

Chapter 13

Madison left the hospital wing feeling almost completely healed. Her leg didn't hurt at all anymore, although there was a tiny scar above her knee. Her abdomen had a much larger scar on it. She still felt some discomfort when she tried to stretch herself or when she turned her body too sharply. Madam Pomfrey had lectured her not to strain herself and she had to return to her once a day for a week to continue taking her potions. She hadn't wanted to release her so soon, but she had pleaded with her relentlessly. Madison couldn't take one more day in the infirmary. She was going crazy with boredom and having finished all her homework, she had nothing to do but to stare at the ceiling and hope, that someone would visit her soon.
Penny was waiting for her when she closed the door to the hospital wing behind her. She insisted on carrying all of her books so she wouldn't over exert herself and they headed for the Gryffindor tower with Penny struggling to hold all the books at once and Madison trying in vain to help her. They bickered the whole way over Madisons books. Finally Penny slapped herself on the forehead and dropped the books on the ground. "I swear, sometimes I just..." she muttered to herself and pulling out her wand, she cast wingardium leviosa on the books. Madison followed Penny laughing.
When the Fat Lady closed behind them, Madison looked around. It felt like she had been away for months, not merely days. Everything looked the same. The gryffindors who were hanging around the common room looked at her briefly, but no one said anything. Madison suspected, that Tulip had threatened them to leave her be. She was grateful either way. They made their way to Madisons dorm room and opened the door. A loud BANG was heard and Madison pulled Penny behind her while grabbing for her wand. "Welcome back!" shouted Tonks and Tulip in unison. Rowan was blowing a party whistle and Dr Filibusters fireworks were whirling above them. Madison let out a breath and beamed at her friends. Stepping out of Pennys way, she saw a peculiar look in her eyes, that made her smile.
"Did we frighten you?" asked Rowan taking the whistle out of her mouth. "I told you guys, that it was too much." she said to Tonks and Tulip.
"No no, it's great! Thank you guys!" said Madison waving her arm at Rowan.
"Yeah, we figured, that with the dull life you lead, you could use some adrenaline." grinned Tonks.
"Charlie, Ben and Barnaby will join us soon, they went to the kitchens to get some supplies." said Tulip.

“Perfect!” said Madison sitting on her bed and putting one hand on her stomach.
“Does it hurt?” asked Penny softly. It did a little bit, but nothing could have made Madison admit that to Penny. “No, I’m fine. Really guys – this is excellent, thanks a lot!”
Rowan put on some music and soon the boys arrived with butterbeers, cauldron cakes, treacle tarts and crisps. Ben opened the window to let out the fireworks still spinning above their heads. Madison ate, laughed and smiled so much, she felt like Christmas had arrived. Penny kept close to her and fussed around to make her as comfortable as possible. Madison kept on insisting, that she was fine, but it felt good to have Penny take care of her. They talked and laughed until it was dark outside and Madison started to yawn. They made plans to go to Hogsmeade together as a group on the coming Saturday and the party split up.
“Well how about it Steward? Have you made a move yet or are you waiting for the next ball?” asked Tulip pulling on her pyjamas.
Madison blushed “What do you mean” she asked trying to sound like she had no idea what Tulip was talking about.
Rowan snorted, but remained quiet.
“Oh hell. We have to start all over again? I thought it was a done deal already. I mean you were all over each other at the ball.” said Tulip rolling her eyes.
“If you mean Penny and me, then we made up yes.” said Madison, finding, that it was easier to play dumb.
“Made up? I mean when will you guys finally make out! She is obviously into you. What are you waiting for?”
Madison made a show of adjusting her pillows so she could avoid looking up. Rowan said climbing into her bed “I hope this er…incident hasn’t made you change your mind Madison?”
“No way Rowan, didn’t you see her tonight? She was looking at Penny like-”
“Will you guys just shut up.” scoffed Madison good-naturedly and climbed in her bed. Well she definitely hadn’t changed her mind. She wasn’t so sure about Penny though.

The next days passed in comfortable routine. Madison returned to classes and immersed herself in her studies once more. Since she wasn’t allowed to train or fly yet by Madam Pomfrey, she spent most of her nights in her common room or in the library with her friends. The school was calming down after Beatrice had been released and most of the students stopped gawking at Madison soon enough.
She went to Dumbledores office once more to ask about her brother. Dumbledore explained to her, that she was free to visit him anytime

she so wished and that he would arrange transport for her. He added however, that his brother remained unresponsive, although the healers were hopeful. Madison thanked him, but made no immediate plans for a visit. She was still feeling very confused when thinking about Jacob. Madison also wrote to her parents, but no prompt reply had arrived. She was not surprised by it.

After a week had passed since Madison had been released from the hospital wing, she finally got Madam Pomfrey to agree to let her continue her training. She had missed it and was looking forward to spending some hours in the room of requirements working out. Life was returning to normal.

Chapter 14

Madison fell back into a familiar routine. Unfortunately that routine included pining after a certain blond haired prefect. She felt as if the celestial ball had never happened. Penny and her spent a lot of time together, studying and lounging around in either Gryffindor or Hufflepuffs common room, but neither of them mentioned the ball. Tonks and Tulip kept up a relentless slew of hints and nudges, but Madison ignored them. She felt butterflies in her stomach remembering the dance, especially what could have happened had it not ended so abruptly, but she also felt like she swallowed a slug when she tried to picture asking Penny out again. It must have been a major fluke, that she said yes the first time, she thought to herself. Most of all – Madison was too terrified to risk their mended friendship.

One morning during breakfast a handsome eagle owl dropped a letter in front of Madison and flew away without stopping. Madison looked at the letter curiously. She didn't usually receive post. The letter was from her parents. Madison tore it open, thinking about news of her brother. It was rather short.

"Dear Madison. We write to inform you that we received your letter and to let you know of our plans for Christmas. We are residing currently in London to be closer to St. Mungos and Jacob. Considering your actions we think it best for all if you stay at Hogwarts for this coming school break. It would not be advisable to let you contact Jacob in any form as it might hinder his recovery. Sincerely, Silver and Cassia Steward."

"Who's it from?" asked Rowan, balancing her paper on her goblet.

"My parents." said Madison and tucked the letter hastily to her pocket.

Rowan raised a quizzical eyebrow. "And?"

"Nothing. No news. They just answered to my last letter." said Madison busying herself with her eggs.

"Yeah, about time." muttered Rowan, but didn't say anything else.

Madison sighed. She wasn't surprised by her parents reaction, but it still hurt her. She knew, that Jacob was their favorite, it had been obvious to her ever since she could stand up. But she had still hoped for something more than a letter after she had almost died. She shook her head and willed herself to not think about them. This strategy had worked for her whole life, it would work now as well. Making quiet plans to go flying after classes she looked around the great hall. Her first glance was towards the Hufflepuff table, where she saw Penny talking to a fellow hufflepuff animatedly. She smiled to herself and

relaxed a bit.
“You are aware that you are dripping yolk on your jeans?” said Rowan barely looking up from her paper. Madison looked down – sure enough there was a splash of yolk on her thigh. She hastily got out her wand to clean the spot.
“You could just ask her out you know.” said Rowan just as calmly.
Madison was about to deny everything and play dumb once more, but looking at Rowan, decided it was futile.
“It’s not that easy.” she said instead, wiping the table in front of her which had also been smeared with dripping eggs.
“How come?” asked Rowan now looking at her.
“It’s just…it’s just not.” answered Madison.
“I think you are overthinking it. Just talk to her and see what she says.”
“That’s the not-so-easy part you know.” said Madison smiling.
“Oh come on. You have faced ice-knights and boggarts. You threw yourself in front of a curse just this semester. Not to mention, it was HER sister you were saving at the time. And now? You’re what? Scared? Please.” Rowan looked at her impatiently. “What are you waiting for?”
“I don’t know. What if after all that has happened she doesn’t want to…maybe she has changed her mind. She hasn’t said anything about the ball to me.” said Madison quietly.
Rowan sighed and returned to her paper. “I think you are both acting like dorcuses.” she said sternly.

Madison was walking towards the main doors with her broom on her shoulder hoping to squeeze in an hour of flying before she had to be back at Gryffindor tower, when she was stopped by an out of breath Beatrice Haywood.
“Madison! Wait!” she panted.
“What’s wrong?” asked Madison dropping her broom. Terrible thoughts of another vault, of Penny hurt were flooding her mind.
“You have to help me. I have a pixie problem.”
“A pixie – what?” asked Madison confused.
“I accidentally released a bunch of pixies in the artefact room – don’t ask me how – and I need help catching them.”
“How on earth did you manage-”
“I just said, don’t ask me how. Please? I don’t want to get in trouble with Sprout and lose house points, but I’m still learning how to cast the freezing charm properly. Pretty please?” she pouted looking up at Madison.
Madison sighed in resignation. “Fine. Sure I’ll help.” She turned back around and started heading towards the artefact room.

“Great! Thanks a bunch Madison!” sighed Beatrice happily. Before they could reach the door to the room, they were joined by an annoyed looking Penny.
“Oh Beatrice! I told you I would help, there was no need to bother Madison.” said Penny looking at Madison apologetically.
“It’s ok Penny, I don’t mind.” said Madison. Capturing pixies started to sound like a pleasant pastime now that she knew Penny would join them.
“Perfect! Well good luck guys.” said Beatrice and started to move away.
“Wait just a moment! Where do you think you’re going?” exclaimed Penny in surprise.
“Well I can’t help you guys. I can’t cast the spell yet. Besides, the room is so small we won’t be able to move in there with all three of us. I really owe you guys. Thanks again.” said Beatrice and skipped away.
Penny looked after her astonished. “I can not believe her.” She looked at Madison. “I’m sorry you got involved. You can go, I can manage the pixies on my own.”
“Naah, don’t worry about it. It will be quicker with the two of us.” said Madison waving her arm dismissively.
They entered the room, shutting the door behind them quickly. Beatrice was right – the room was full of screeching pixies, who, when seeing them enter, bolted towards them. Penny cast a slowing down charm quickly and they got to work. They stood back to back and cast spells on the pixies one by one. Every now and then they had to recast the slowing charm. It was hard work – the pixies inched closer to them whenever they could and tried to scratch them or pull their hair.
“Sisters.” grumbled Penny to herself. Madison laughed and cast an enbublio charm on the pixie closest to her. They were just about done, only two pixies remained. Penny picked one of them up and thrust it inside the cage on the table, now full of silenced pixies. Suddenly the freezing charm wore off the last pixie and it dived at Penny squeaking shrilly. Madison cast the freezing charm again, but was a bit late. The pixie was entangled in Pennys hair.
“Wait, stop. I’ll get it.” said Madison quickly and went to help Penny. She pocketed her wand and started to untangle the frozen pixie. The pixie glared at her the whole time, but Madison ignored it. She felt rather warm standing this close to Penny. Fortunately she was taller than her which made the job easier. She glanced at Penny who was looking up at her with an unreadable expression. Madison worked slowly so as not to hurt Penny. When she finally got the pixie off of Penny she pushed it inside the cage and closed the door.
“There you go.” she said quietly. Penny hadn’t moved from her spot, she was still standing very close to Madison, looking at her.

“Thank you.” she said softly.
Madison knew that she should move, should leave the room. There wasn’t anything else to do, the pixies were all caught. But her feet didn’t listen. She and Penny remained standing like this, looking at each other. Madison stared straight into her eyes, admiring for the hundredth time the sparkling blue that glistened back at her. A surge of bravery overtook her suddenly. She leaned forward, and closing her eyes, pressed her lips against Pennys. Madison felt like she was floating – Pennys lips were softer than she could ever have imagined. Her whole body tingled with excitement and her head felt full and empty at the same time. Just as suddenly she came to her senses and pulled away. Oh hell – she thought. What had she done.
“I’m sorry.” said Madison quickly. “I didn’t mean to. I just…I should have…I’ll just go. Sorry!” she retreated hastily to the door.
“Madison!” yelled Penny after her. “Wait!”
But Madison ripped the door open and started to walk quickly away. She could not believe herself. What was she thinking. Well obviously she hadn’t been thinking. She could never show her face around Penny ever again. Damn Beatrice and her pixies!
All of a sudden Madison felt someone pulling her arm. She turned around and saw an out of breath Penny. She had obviously ran after her.
Madison didn’t know what to say. She just looked at her pleadingly. Penny looked back and started to say something but closed her mouth right away. She started again, but then sighed and looked down. Madison felt despair in her rise and was just about to bolt away again when Penny shook her head, and looking up, reached both of her hands behind Madisons head and pulled her down, pressing their lips together once more. Madison melted into the kiss almost immediately. It felt like she had found the thing she was supposed to do in life – kiss Penny Haywood. She put her hands tentatively at Pennys back in effect pulling them even closer than they were. Penny leaned into her and moved her hands slowly through Madisons hair.
It didn’t matter anymore how this would end, it didn’t matter if anyone saw them. This moment was worth everything thought Madison. Penny felt so warm and soft against her, that all coherent thought left her quickly. It was an unwelcome giggling that finally brought them out of their haze. Madison looked around frowning and saw Beatrice crouching behind a statue next to the staircase. She was watching them, snickering gleefully. When she realized that she had been caught, she jumped up and ran towards the kitchens. Her chuckles echoed behind her. Madison looked at Penny. She was beaming at her and Madison felt tempted to resume kissing her at once. She however pulled herself together and coughed a bit flustered,

smiling back at Penny. She had no idea what to say.
“I…well. Hmm..That was…” why are words so hard?
“Perfect!” said Penny firmly, still beaming at her.
“Re..really? You’re not upset or –?” asked Madison cautiously.
“No. Of course not. I ran after you, remember?” said Penny warmly.
“I – well ahem..yes you did.” said Madison feeling even more flustered. “But I kissed you first and –“
“And thank Merlin you did! I was going crazy wondering how to tell you I fancied you.”
“You…you were?” blurted Madison.
“Yes! All I’ve wanted to do since the ball was to kiss you. Even before that. But then the portrait happened and Beatrice..and then I messed everything up. I was trying to get up the courage to talk to you.”
“You didn’t mess anything up.” said Madison smiling. “So you fancy me?” she asked shyly.
Penny blushed and looked at her feet. “Yeah. I do.” She looked up again with more confidence. “I really do Madison.”
“That is excellent!” said Madison beaming. “Cause I fancy you too. Very much so.” Penny beamed back at her, a small giggle escaping her lips.
“I’ve been wanting to talk with you too, but I was scared as well.”
“Well I’m glad the pixies gave you courage tonight then.” said Penny. “I have to thank my sister.”
Madison looked at the clock, it was close to bedtime.
“So…” she said disappointed that they had to part so soon.
“I’ll see you tomorrow?” said Penny squeezing her hand.
“Yeah! Definitely!” said Madison. Penny started to move towards the kitchens.
Oh to hell with it, thought Madison. “Wait!” she said catching up with her. Penny looked back just as Madison reached her and, taking her head in her hands, she kissed her once more tenderly. Penny put her arms around Madison and smiled into the kiss.
“Good night then.” said Madison sheepishly when they drew apart.
“Good night.” smiled Penny and turned, leaving the same way her sister had run.
Madison practically floated back to her room, grinning from ear to ear. She decided to buy Mona a box of Honeydukes Best Chocolates the next time she went to Hogsmeade.

Chapter 15

The next morning Madison woke feeling extremely happy. It took her some seconds before she remembered why she was feeling that way. When she did, a laugh escaped her and she stretched feeling like she could take on the world. Tulip who was fumbling in her trunk looked at her quizzically.
“Someone’s happy?”
“Yep!” said Madison unabashedly. “I am.” She got out of bed and glanced at the window. “Beautiful morning” she commented.
“What’s up with you today?” laughed Tulip looking at Madison.
Rowan yawned and opened her curtains. “Morning!”
“Good morning!” answered Madison brightly. Rowan squinted at Madison with sleepy eyes. “Why so cheerful?” she asked skeptically.
“Why so serious?” answered Madison smiling before remembering, that Tulip and Rowan were not the best audience on whom to try her muggle-movie references. “Never mind.” waved Madison hastily seeing Rowans confused look. “I’m just in a good mood.”
“And why today especially might I ask?” said Rowan.
“Well, if you must know, then Penny and me –“
“WHOOO! Effin finally!” shouted Tulip. Madison grinned at her enthusiasm.
“Really? You and Penny finally happened?” asked Rowan smiling hopefully at Madison.
“Yep!” said Madison.
“So you’re together now? T’was about time. Congrats!” Tulip bumped her shoulder approvingly.
Madison remained silent for couple of minutes.
“What do you mean together?” she asked slowly, looking at Tulip.
“I mean you’re like girlfriends. You’re dating now.” said Tulip.
Madison didn’t say anything. She felt like someone had let the air out of her happy bubble. She hadn’t even considered what kissing Penny meant in a greater scheme. She was just overjoyed to be kissing her at all. She sagged and sat down on her bed half-dressed. Should she have asked Penny to be her girlfriend yesterday evening? Maybe she had expected it and was now disappointed? Had she already messed it up?
“It’s ok Madison” said Rowan quietly while Tulip was getting dressed.
“You’ll talk soon. Don’t worry about it.” Madison nodded gratefully. Rowan was right. She would find Penny and they would talk and maybe...Slowly Madisons smile returned.

She didn’t spot Penny near the hall before breakfast and headed in, hoping to see her at the Hufflepuff table. She was not there however.

Slightly disappointed, Madison sat down with Ben, Tonks, Tulip and Rowan. Tonks was explaining in detail what went wrong with Hufflepuffs last quidditch match against Ravenclaw to Madison when she saw a whirlwind of blonde hair out of the corner of her eye. Penny sat down next to her.
“Hey!” she said, looking at Madison smiling.
“Hey!” answered Madison smiling back at her.
“Hello? Guys?” said Tonks waving her arms around Madison and Penny.
“Don’t bother” laughed Ben.
“I’m sorry” said Penny tearing her eyes from Madisons and looking at Tonks. “I didn’t mean to interrupt you.” Underneath the table Madison felt Pennys hand slip into her own. She blushed slightly and smiled “Yeah, sorry Tonks.”
“Never mind. I know when I’m the fifth wheel” sighed Tonks dramatically and got up. Feeling quilty Madison asked her “Quidditch later? So you can show me what you meant by the fake finbourgh flick.”
“Sure! Don’t worry about it” said Tonks “Have a good time guys!” she said wiggling her eyebrows and left laughing.
Rowan got up also “I have to go to the library before class” she said stiffly and tugged Ben by his shoulder “Come on, you need to help me with a thing.”
“What thing?” asked Ben perplexed.
“The thing! The thing at the library. Just come on!” exclaimed Rowan and dragged Ben off.
Tulip, Madison and Penny sat in silence for a moment before Tulip looked at them and blurted “Right. I forgot. I have to go and help Rowan...and Ben...with the thing...in the library.” Tulip got up and left winking at Madison slyly.
Penny giggled at Madison. “Subtle weren’t they?” Madison laughed “Oh yes, smooth as butter.”
“Have you finished breakfast? Fancy a walk?” asked Penny.
“Yeah, I’m done. Let’s go” said Madison willingly. This was it, this was her chance to talk with Penny about what yesterday evening meant. She swallowed and tried to rally her thoughts.
They left the school and walked towards the lake. When they had left most of the students lounging around near the main gates behind them, Penny took Madisons hand again.
“So guess what? Beatrice told me, that she had been trying to get us together for more than a week now.”
“Really? Well I’m glad she succeeded” answered Madison.
“Me too. Especially after I heard her other plans for us. We were rather fortunate with the pixies.”

“What do you mean?” asked Madison.
“Let’s just say, that there were alternative plans that involved blast-ended skrewts, amortentia potion and a stink pellet” said Penny.
“Say no more” laughed Madison. “Listen Penny. I wanted to ask you something.”
Taking a big gulp of air, Madison stumbled on “I was wondering if you’d like to go on a date with me?”
Penny laughed “Of course! You don’t have to be so scared Madison. Did you think I would say no?”
“Well…I wasn’t sure…” said Madison rubbing the back of her neck feeling flustered.
Penny looked at her gently “Listen – I like you, a lot. I was so glad that yesterday evening happened, that I couldn’t stop smiling this morning.”
Madison looked at her surprised “Really? Me too!”
Penny didn’t answer but took Madison by the front of her robes and pulled her down for a kiss. Madisons eyes fluttered shut and the hair at the back of her neck stood up. She would never grow tired of doing that.
When the kiss ended Penny smiled slyly and asked. “So when were you planning this date of ours?”
Madison hadn’t truthfully made any plans yet, but she knew what she wanted to do. “How about tomorrow after classes? Are you free?”
“Yes” smiled Penny.
“Brilliant!” answered Madison and took Pennys hand, walking slowly back towards Hogwarts.

With renewed energy Madison dived into schoolwork. She wanted to clear her schedule for the coming night so she could focus on her date. Professor McGonagall gave her a rare smile when she switched her armadillo with a pillow successfully on her first try and professor Snape didn’t say anything about her strenghtening solution which was considered by all to translate into high praise.
Madison met Tonks after potions class and together they went to the quidditch pitch. There was a group of students waiting for them, eager to start the match. Among them where Charlie and Bill Weasley.
Madison flew well. She had flown ever since she could remember. She often used flying as means to gather her thoughts and straighten her head and had spent most of her childhood flying to avoid the coldness at home. As a result, her broom felt like an extra limb to her, she could twist and turn, dive and speed up at the last moment without a second thought. She usually played as chaser, but they switched roles so she was also a seeker for one and a goalkeeper for the other match. They had a blast and played three matches all together, stopping only

because it was getting dark. When they were leaving, a ravenclaw player called Skye approached Madison.
“Hey Steward! Nice flying today. You should consider joining your team.”
“Thanks” Madison grinned at her.
“Well she would join Gryffindors team Skye, not Ravenclaws. You would have to play against her” laughed Charlie.
“I know, I always want to face the best I can. And your team could use the boost.” answered Skye teasingly.
“She’s right you know” said Charlie to Madison when they were heading to Gryffindor tower “You should think about joining the team. We could use someone who flies like you do.”
“Thanks Charlie. Maybe. I’ll think about it.” said Madison.

The next day passed quickly. Madison had a lot to do to prepare for the evening. She had decided to take Penny to one of her favorite places in Hogwarts – the astronomy tower. It was out of bounds for students outside of classes, but Madison was skilled in sneaking around the castle and knew a few useful secret passages, that helped her navigate the corridors and avoid being seen when she so wished. She jogged to the kitchens after classes and asked the house-elves to give her some snacks to bring with her. The house-elves were very pleased that they could be useful and prepared a large basket of sandwiches, crisps, cakes, fruit and butterbeer. Madison thanked them profusely and they bowed and smiled at her.
Next she sprinted to the astronomy tower to prepare the scene. She laid out a large blanket in the middle of the circular room and placed the basket on it. She also conjured a small vase of flowers in the middle of the blanket to make the whole set look more like a dinner table. Finally she conjured twelve little jars and cast bluebell flames in them. She distributed the jars around the blanket so that they illuminated and warmed the otherwise chilly tower. Leaving to go and meet Penny, Madison cast colloportus on the door, so that no one could disturb the site.

Penny and she had agreed to meet near the statue of Gregory the Smarmy. Madison got there a bit early and started pacing in the corridor. She was nervous, but excited at the same time. She tried to smooth out her hair a bit, but was unsuccessful – her locks sprang in every direction the moment she removed her hand from her head.
“Don’t. I like your hair.” said a soft voice behind her. Madison jumped around. Penny was standing there watching her, smiling. Madison blushed at being caught and shook her head.
“Hey.”
“Hey yourself.” said Penny and inched closer to her, taking her hand.

Madison smiled shyly at her and kissed her on the cheek quickly.
“Ready to go?” she asked.
“Yes. Were are we going anyway? We can’t go to Hogsmeade, it’s Thursday.” asked Penny curiously.
“No, not Hogsmeade. At least not today. Come on.”
Madison pulled Pennys hand and she followed her behind a tapestry. They reached the astronomy tower without anyone seeing them. Madison cast alohomora on the door to unlock it and they stepped inside.
“Oh Madison!” exclaimed Penny in awe, looking around the circular tower. The light outside was beginning to dim and the small jars of light eluminated the blanket and the flowers in the middle. It looked very cozy and inviting.
“When did you do this? It’s wonderful!” asked Penny.
“After classes. This is one of my favorite spots in the castle. It’s very peaceful, no one ever comes here outside classes. I like the view and I thought, maybe you’d enjoy it too. So this is ok?” explained Madison pulling Penny to sit down on the blanket.
“It’s more than ok. It is amazing!” said Penny sitting down.
“Good. I’m glad you like it. I come here often, this felt like the right place for our first date” smiled Madison feeling content with herself.
“It’s a perfect place for our first date. It reminds me of this spot near my parents house where I used to go when I was younger. There was this huge boulder in the forest and there where no trees around it. I used to go and sit there and look at the stars” said Penny dreamily.
“I used to fly as far as I dared to get away and think when I was younger” said Madison.
“So that’s why you’re so good on a broomstick” smiled Penny.
“You think? Skye said I should join the team” said Madison.
“She’s right, you should. You’re an excellent flyer” nodded Penny.
“What about you? Haven’t you ever wanted to play quidditch?” asked Madison opening the basket and laying out all the food.
“No way,” laughed Penny “I have no coordination at all. I can fly from point A to point B and that’s about it. If someone was chucking bludgers at me, I would topple of the broom instantly. I prefer to watch others play.”
“So you follow any teams?” asked Madison handing Penny a butterbeer,
“Not really. I’m a bit partial to Appleby Arrows, my grandmother is from Cumbria. I would come and watch you play for sure though” smiled Penny while taking a sip from her butterbeer.
Madison smiled as well. This felt easy. She didn’t know what she had been worried about. Spending time with Penny was effortless, conversation flowed freely and soon they had finished the contents of

the basket, talking the whole time. Feeling full and relaxed, Madison laid on her back and put her arms behind her head.
“Mars is bright tonight” observed Madison.
Penny laid down also and scooted close to Madison.
“Are you cold? I can-” asked Madison half-rising.
Penny pushed her back down. “I’m not cold. I wanted to be closer to you” she said matter-of-factly.
“Oh” said Madison and got back down. She pulled Penny close to her with one arm so that she was cuddled into her side. Penny sighed contentedly. “This has been a perfect date. Thank you.”
“No problem. So does this mean you’re up for a sequel?” asked Madison.
“Definitely!" answered Penny.
They stayed quiet for some time, watching the stars together. Finally Madison summoned her courage and asked the question that was burning inside her.
“Penny?”
“Yes?”
“Does this all mean that we’re dating now? Like officially? Are you my girlfriend?”
Penny pushed herself on her elbow to look at Madison. “Do you want me to be your girlfriend?”
Madison reddened slightly but answered firmly nonetheless “Yes. Would you? Be my girlfriend I mean?”
Penny smiled “I’d love to be your girlfriend Madison.” She leaned down and kissed her boldly. Madison placed her hands on her back and kissed her back just as eagerly. This was heaven. Penny Haywood was her girlfriend! She couldn’t believe her luck.
They kissed for a long time, Penny ending up half on top of Madison with her hands around her head. When they finally pulled apart they were both a bit out of breath and pink-faced.
“Thank you for tonight Madison!” said Penny and placed a quick peck on her nose.
Madison just hugged her tightly in response. This had been the best night in her life.

Chapter 16

The next weeks were the happiest Madison had ever known. Being with Penny made her feel high on adrenaline and extremely tranquil at the same time. They spent as much time together as their busy schedules allowed. Penny had frequent prefect duties and all the professors were handing out double the homework they had done the years previous.

They still managed to sneak in dates at suitable locations in both Hogwarts and Hogsmeade. They had visited a small tea shop in Hogsmeade – Madam Puddifoots, and had both disliked it at once. Once they ventured into a dingy pub called Hog's Head Inn, but it seemed a bit too dirty and dubious to make them feel at ease.

One of their best afternoons in Hogsmeade was spent shopping around the little stores. Penny dragged Madison into a herbology shop called Dogwead and Deathcap and subsequently spent two hours chattering about different potions and their ingredients. They both spent the same amount of time in Tomes and Scrolls, a small bookshop with the added bonus of no shushing as there was no Madam Pince there.

Schooldays passed quickly since there was so much studying to be done, that none of them had time to find each other during breaks from lessons they didn't share. Still, it sometimes happened that a hand pulled Madison inside an empty classroom from the corridor and she found herself alone with Penny, if only for a few minutes.

One morning Madison was sitting alone at the breakfast table. She had woken a bit earlier than usual and didn't want to disturb Tulip and Rowan and so decided to come down before them. She was soon joined by Tonks.

"Mo—ooh—orning Madison" yawned Tonks sleepily.

"Morning. You're here early" replied Madison.

"Yeah. Big plans today" said Tonks buttering a roll. "Me and Adam are going to try a spell to stick stink pellets to ever-bashing-boomerangs."

Madison raised her eyebrows.

"Why on earth would you want to do that?" she asked.

"Why not? Just imagine – you are running away from the boomerang, but every time it hits you, it drops a stink pellet to boot. It would make the boomerang a much more well-rounded prank."

Madison smiled benignly. "Have it your way. Where are you going to test this new age prank device by the way? Just so I know where is safe?"

"The second-floor corridor probably, there are many fast exit points there. You know, in case not everyone appreciates the spirit of creativity as much as we do" smirked Tonks.

Madison took another bite out of her toast. “Good to know.”
“By the way. I’ve been meaning to ask you – has Charlie been acting strangely in your opinion?”
“Charlie? No, not that I’ve noticed. Why?” asked Madison surprised.
“Maybe it’s me, but he seems a bit distracted lately. He’s been slacking on his homework and while I find that completely normal behavior, it is a bit out of character for him. I was just wondering if he has said anything to you” said Tonks casually.
“No he hasn’t” said Madison thoughtfully. “I’ll talk to him when I see him, find out what’s up.”
Madison stayed quiet for a bit while Tonks buttered her fourth roll.
“Now that I think about it though, he has been skiving our quidditch friendlies.”
“You see – weird isn’t it, he loves quidditch” said Tonks nodding.
“You’re right. It is.” Madison looked around hoping to find Charlie, but he was not in the hall yet. She did however spot Rowan and Penny entering and waved them over.
They sat down next to Madison and Tonks.
“You’re early today” commented Penny smiling at Madison.
“Yeah, woke earlier than I wanted to” shrugged Madison. “Have any of you seen Charlie?”
“Yeah he was just outside the hall talking to professor Kettleburn” said Penny.
“Really? I’ll be right back” said Madison and jumped up from her seat. She ran outside and caught a glimpse of Charlies back.
“Charlie! Wait!” she yelled and sprinted towards him.
“Hey Madison. What’s up?” asked Charlie.
“Are you joining the friendlies tonight?” asked Madison.
“Naah, can’t tonight” said Charlie looking absent minded.
“Are you ok Charlie? You’ve been missing a lot of friendlies lately and Tonks mentioned you have been neglecting your homework as well.”
“That’s none of her business” said Charlie angrily.
Madison was surprised. Charlie was always very laid-back and rarely lashed out at anyone.
“She was concerned. And I am too. Is everything alright with you?” asked Madison.
Charlie drooped a bit. “I’m sorry Madison. I didn’t mean to snap at you. I’m fine. It’s just that I have this…thing.” Charlie looked around them covertly. “Can you keep a secret? Ah, never mind, I know you can. Listen, I actually could use your help. Can you meet me later, after quidditch?”
“Ok…” said Madison feeling a bit uneasy for some reason. “Where?”
“Near the whomping willow. And bring your broom.”
“Why?” asked Madison.

“I'll explain later. And please keep quiet about it” whispered Charlie and almost ran towards the dungeons.
Madison looked after him puzzled. It was not like Charlie to be so on the edge. He was usually the most confident and relaxed guy Madison knew. She was starting to feel increasingly anxious, the more she thought about it.
Penny, Tonks and Rowan were still at the great hall when Madison returned.
“So? What's up with him?” asked Tonks the moment Madison sat down.
“Don't know, he didn't say.”
Madison felt guilty for not telling her friends and especially Penny about Charlie wanting to meet her in the evening, but she didn't want to betray Charlies trust either. Penny looked at her pensively, but didn't push Madison for more information. Instead she stroked Madisons back affectionately, making her feel even more in error.

After a spirited match between the ravenclaws and gryffindors, which finished with a close win for the latter, Madison tried to lag behind the others when leaving the quidditch pitch. This proved a bit of a challenge, when Skye fell behind also and kept wanting to chat with her. She finally got rid of her by lying that she had left her bag at the quidditch stands and doubled back. When she was out of view, Madison took a turn towards the whomping willow. She reached the tree, but kept her distance. Only a fool would get close to the whomping willow. Charlie came running to her, carrying his broomstick.
“Here you are. Ready?” asked Charlie anxiously.
“No. For what? You didn't explain anything to me before” said Madison confused.
“Right, right” said Charlie not looking at Madison, but straining to look towards the Forbidden forest instead.
“Ok, so here's the deal. Hagrid told me a week ago, that there's a dragon staying in the Forbidden forest. He had seen him flying there a few times, and he reckons, that he’s stopping there for some time.”
“Merlins beard! A dragon! Are you sure?” asked Madison, her mouth hanging open.
“Yes, Hagrid wouldn't lie. He was so happy, that the dragon chose this forest to rest in. He said, that it means, that the conditions here are suitable for him.”
“Ok, well that's nice for the dragon, but what does this have to do with us?” asked Madison.
“I want to go and see him” said Charlie seriously.
“You...you...” sputtered Madison.

“And I want you to come with me” added Charlie.
“Come with...you...to see a dragon? Are you insane?” yelled Madison.
“Shhh. Do you want the whole castle to hear? Yes, I want you to come with me. I'm a bit scared you see, I could use some support” said Charlie looking down and twisting his broom in his hands.
“A bit scared? You should be terrified! What you are saying is, that you want to fly into the Forbidden Forest, which is FORBIDDEN by the way” yelled Madison again “and seek out a dragon. And then what? Be his friend?” asked Madison incredulously.
“I know it sounds mad, I know. But I want this so much. I've been dreaming about seeing a dragon ever since I was little. I can't not go and see one now that he's so close to me, I just can't. So I'm going either way, I would like it if you would come with me though” finished Charlie firmly.
“To what? Bring back your ashes?” asked Madison bewildered.
“No...for support. I'm afraid. I understand, that this is foolish, I do, but I will go alone if you decide not to come. And I promise, no hard feelings if you decide not to” said Charlie earnestly.
Madison stayed quiet for a while looking at Charlie. She knew him pretty well by now. Ever since they first met, Charlie had talked about nothing else, but dragons. He had also never abandoned Madison and had always helped her in any way that he could. Madison knew, that Charlie meant it when he said, that he would go alone if Madison decided not to come. She couldn’t help but admire his passion. She sighed heavily, resigned.
“Ok. I'll come” she said.
“Brilliant!” beamed Charlie and mounted his broom. “Stay near so we won't get separated in the dark, ok?”
“What, we're going now?” exclaimed Madison.
“Yeah, of course. We can't wait for long. The dragon could leave anytime, they don't stay in one place for long expect while nesting” answered Charlie.
Madison mounted her broom again, silently praying that the dragon had left already.

They flew side-by-side for over an hour. Madison started to feel optimistic that they wouldn't find the dragon and would have to just give up. She had never flown this deep into the forest before. Just when she was about to ask Charlie how long did he want to continue the search, a blaze of light erupted below them in the forest.
“There!” shouted Charlie and started to descend.
“Wait! Don't go too near it!” shouted Madison following Charlie.
“Don't worry, follow me!” answered Charlie and continued spiraling downwards. They landed in a small clearing, too close to the spot

where fire had erupted, for Madisons liking.
Charlie was looking for something from his pockets.
“Here. Put this on your neck” he thrust a small box containing a smelly ointment at Madison.
“What is it?” asked Madison smelling it suspiciously.
“It's olidus oil. Hagrid mentioned it and I spent the entire afternoon making it. It's used to cover your smell. If you put it on, the dragon won't be able to smell us. We will smell like the forest around us” said Charlie, rubbing his neck with the oil.
“Well this is a tiny sliver of sense in a huge pile of stupid” muttered Madison and dabbed the oil on her neck.
“Ready? Let's go!” said Charlie eagerly.
“Ok, but Charlie – not too close ok? I mean we can't outrun or fly the dragon, so our only hope is that it won't see us.”
“Yes, I know, we'll be careful” nodded Charlie.
They moved slowly closer. No additional fire bursts had appeared, but the trees around them bore scorch marks and some were trampled, like a huge beast had stomped through the same path, they were following. Madisons heart was pounding in her chest. She thought fleetingly about Penny and wished she could be in her common room with the blonde now, instead of the Forbidden forest, chasing a dragon.
Suddenly Charlie stopped dead and Madison, who had been following him, bumped into his back.
“There...” whispered Charlie in awe. Madison peered around his shoulder and saw a huge tail that was covered in spikes. Her eyes traveled along the seemingly never-ending tail until she gasped as she took in the whole size of the dragon. It was at least 30 feet long and had dark skin, and leathery looking wings. Fortunately for Charlie and Madison, it was not looking at them, but was laying on his side, slowly breathing out small puffs of steam.
“It's amazing. Might be a Hebridean Black” said Charlie in awe.
Madison didn't really care about his breed, she was more worried, that he would realize they were there. Quietly she tried to tug Charlie back towards the clearing, but he just stood transfixed by the sight before him.
Suddenly Madison heard sounds coming from the forest around them. It sounded like footsteps where closing in on them. Madison tugged Charlie harder, but to no avail. Unfortunately the dragon had heard the movement as well. He reared his head and looked around. There was one second, during which Madison, Charlie and the dragon where all staring at each other and then someone yelled “Stupefy” and the dragon turned towards the voice. Madison pulled Charlie behind a bush and peered around it at the scene. At least six or seven figures

were emerging from the forest and circulated around the dragon. All of them had their wands out and were pointing them at the confused dragon. When the dragon saw all of them, he gave an almighty growl and shot a burst of flames at the nearest wizard. He ducked quickly and avoided the fire.
“All together now!” shouted someone. The dragon got to his feet and growled ferociously. The sight was mesmerizing – the dragons wings glittered in the moonlight and his eyes were bright purple, narrowing as he opened his mouth for another burst of flames.
“Stupefy!” at least four or five voices shouted now. The dragon swayed, but didn’t fall. He swished his tail in a half-circle, tearing bushes and smaller trees with it. Madison reacted instinctively and jumped onto Charlies back, pushing him on the ground under herself. The massive tail thrashed over their heads, missing them by inches.
“Come on, we have to get out of here!” whispered Madison into Charlies ear. She felt him nod and started to crawl off of him, backing away as quietly as she could.
A razor sharp pain exploded on her back, near her shoulder. The dragons tail had flailed over them once more and grazed Madisons shoulder. It stung, but didn’t feel deep. She continued backing away, crawling near the ground. Charlie followed her, his eyes never leaving the dragon.
The voices of the wizards and witches were shouting among themselves and Madison saw more spells being fired. One of the spells illuminated the face of a tall wizard standing at the dragons left side. Madison froze. The face was familiar. But it made no sense. How could this be? What could he be doing here? Sure, that she had imagined it, Madison gawked at the wizard, until under another flash of light she realized, that she had not. One of the wizards was her father.
Charlies heels were near her face now. He looked back and whispered urgently “Move!”
Madison remained rooted to the spot. Charlie prodded her with his foot and whispered again “Madison! Move!”
Madison tore her eyes away from the fight and started crawling again. When they had put enough distance between themselves and the dragon, they stood up.
“What happ-” started Charlie when another loud roar filled the air and they saw the dragon rise above the trees. Little figures of flying wizards and witches could be seen circling the beast, firing spells at him.
“We can’t fly up high, we have to stay between the trees” said Charlie looking at the dragon almost wistfully. They mounted their brooms and flew near the treetops. It was harder to fly at this height as they

had to avoid the branches and they couldn't see were they were going. Madison was speechless. She wanted to turn around and find out why her father was there, but had enough common sense left in her, that she knew it would be impossible to reach her father while he was fighting a dragon. But why was he there in the first place. Her mind was swimming with theories and explanations, but none of them seamed feasible.
Faster than she had anticipated, they saw the edge of the forest appear. Charlie flew closer to her and shouted "Let's fly to the astronomy tower, the main doors are closed now."
Madison nodded mutely at him and turned her broom.
They landed at the tower and stood looking at each other. Both of them had multiple cuts and scratches on them.
"What do you reckon the wizards were there for?" asked Charlie from Madison.
"No idea. Maybe they were there to catch him? I saw one of their faces. It was my father" said Madison still in shock.
"Your father! I didn't know he's a dragonologist" exclaimed Charlie.
"He's not. I have no idea why he was there" said Madison slowly.
"So that's why you froze? Blimey!"
"Yeah, sorry about that" muttered Madison.
"No problem, I would have been squashed by that tail if you hadn't jumped on me, so we're even" answered Charlie. "Did you see him though. Magnificent he was. That tail and those wings. I hope those wizards won't hurt him" said Charlie.
"You're hopeless" smiled Madison at Charlie.
"Thank you Madison. This was the best night of my life!" beamed Charlie and hugged Madison.
"This was your best night?" croaked Madison "We were almost killed by a dragon and nearly flattened against the trees. Your idea of a good time needs revising if this was your best night."
"I saw a dragon, my very first. I've been dreaming about it for so long and now I've finally seen one. And wasn't he beautiful? Thank you for coming with me Madison, it means a lot" Charlie slapped Madison on the back "You're a good friend!"
"Ow!" yelped Madison.
"Oh, sorry!" said Charlie apologetically. "We'd better get back to the common room."
They sneaked down from the tower and listened for sounds of Filch roaming around. All was quiet as they moved carefully towards the Fat Lady.

Chapter 17

When the portrait closed behind them, they sighed with relief. Rowan was curled up on the sofa and Tulip was laying over the armchair. They had obviously fallen asleep waiting for them.
Madison prodded Rowan gently and Charlie shook Tulips shoulder.
“What?..oh..it’s you guys. Where did you disappear to? We were getting—Merlins beard! What happened to you?” cried Tulip rising from the chair.
“It’s a long story” said Madison sullenly.
“Better start talking then” answered Rowan sternly.
“Can you help us a little bit Rowan?” asked Charlie. “I’m no good at healing spells and Madison has a cut on her shoulder.”
“What on earth happened?” asked Rowan surveying them wide-eyed.
“You talk” said Madison, looking at Charlie “I’m exhausted.”
Rowan and Tulip pulled out their wands and started going over their cuts, casting the episkey spell over each individual injury. While they were working, Charlie told them what had happened.
“You are insane, you do realize that?” asked Rowan when they had finished healing them. “Do you understand, that you could be expelled for about fifty different reasons after tonight?”
“But you really saw a dragon? Cool!” said Tulip longingly. “But stupid also, of course” she added when she saw the look Rowan gave her.
“It was all my fault, I asked Madison to join me. It was all my idea” said Charlie.
“Oh I got that. Was it really worth it?” asked Rowan looking at Charlie.
“It was” said Charlie simply.
“What about your father Madison? Any idea why he was there?” asked Tulip curiously.
“No. I’m completely at a loss” answered Madison “Listen, I’m dead tired. Could you please heal my shoulder also, so I can go to bed?”
Charlie got up to retire to his room. “Thanks again, all of you. I’m very lucky to have you guys.” He smiled kindly at all of them and climbed the stairs to the boys rooms. They heard him mumbling to himself “A Hebridean black...wow.”
Tutting, Rowan gestured Madison to remove her sweater. She did so and stood in her tank-top.
“Oh hell” said Tulip looking at her back.
“What? Is it bad? It doesn’t hurt much” said Madison trying to get a look herself.
“Stay still” huffed Rowan “No it’s not deep, but it’s not a normal cut. I don’t think episkey will work. I think you better go to Madam

Pomfrey with this one Madison."
"I can't do that. How will I explain a dragon tail to her?" exclaimed Madison desperately.
"Don't worry, she never asks about where the injuries come from. She's seen too much weird stuff, believe me" said Tulip. When she saw the questioning looks the others gave her, she added quickly "Not me. Friends of mine, I've heard."
"Ok then" said Rowan "Go to Madam Pomfrey tomorrow first thing Madison, I can put a bandage on this for the night."
"Thanks a bunch Rowan" sighed Madison.
When she had changed into her pyjamas, Madison fell into bed. Her body was so tired, that she couldn't even lift her arms, but her mind was racing with questions about her father. What could this all mean? Was her mother there also and she just hadn't seen her? She had no answers, but resolved to find out everything she could.

The next morning Madison woke with a groan. The back of her shoulder stung and itched and she had bled all over her sheets. Pale and week, she struggled to get up.
"Ok. Hospital wing – now!" said Rowan as soon as she saw her "I'll come with to help you."
Madison nodded and got up. She staggered a bit, but managed to get dressed with Rowans help. They left the Gryffindor tower without anyone taking notice of them.
Tulip was right. Madam Pomfrey didn't ask anything, she just ordered Madison to remove her t-shirt and sat her on the same bed she had left weeks earlier. Rowan stayed near and helped Madison get undressed. Madam Pomfrey rubbed some sort of a salve on her back, that took away the stinging sensation at once. Then she dressed the wound again and gave her a blood-replenishing potion. She did want to admit Madison for the day, but she refused. Thanking her, Madison and Rowan left the infirmary with Madison feeling considerably better. The potion had made her feel stronger and color was returning to her face.
Outside the hospital wing they ran into a white-faced Penny.
"Madison! Are you alright? I just saw Tulip in your dormitory and she told me the craziest story." Penny threw her arms around Madison and squeezed her tightly. Madison winced a little when Penny inadvertently pressed on her wound. She let go of her at once and observed her with distressed eyes. "What's the matter? Are you hurt?" she asked urgently.
"I'll leave the explaining to you" said Rowan. Mouthing "good luck" to Madison behind Pennys back, she left to the great hall.
"What happened?" asked Penny seriously. Madison took a big breath

and filled Penny in on the happenings of the previous night. They sat on a bench under a painting of an elderly witch and Penny held Madisons hand in hers. She felt her hand tremble as she got further in the story and her eyes widened in horror.
“But I’m fine now. I only want to understand why my father was there” finished Madison.
“Are you sure? I mean your back is still hurting you, isn’t it?” asked Penny in a shaky voice.
“I’m fine, it will heal” said Madison dismissively.
“You can’t be so careless Madison!” said Penny with an incensed voice. “You been hurt too many times as it is. I can not believe Charlie dragged you into this.”
“He was so happy though” smiled Madison “He said, it was his dream to see one.”
“Even so. You could have been seriously hurt or…” Pennys voice faded and she took Madisons hand with both of her own “I was worried” she whispered.
“I’m sorry Penny” said Madison reaching her other hand to Penny as well. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you that Charlie was up to something. He said I should keep quiet and I didn’t want to-”
“I understand” said Penny “But I’m going to have a talk with him about endangering my girlfriend and the consequences that might have for him in the future.” A fire burned in Pennys eyes and Madison looked at her surprised, she had never seen Penny look so dangerous before.
“He didn’t mean for us to get hurt, he just wanted to see a dragon so badly, it sort of drove him crazy for a while I think” said Madison soothingly.
Penny tutted, but looking at Madison, her eyes softened and she stroked her hair with one of her hands.
“What have I gotten myself into” she mused to herself “I have a girlfriend whom I can’t get enough of, who keeps throwing herself in front of spells and dragons.”
Madison smiled “You’d rather I throw myself at something else?” As soon as she had said that, she blushed. She hadn’t meant it the way it came out.
Penny gave her a pointed look and answered “Yes, I would as a matter of fact.”
This made Madison even more flustered. Penny kissed her gently and added pulling away “But I would settle for a girlfriend who is not actively bleeding from a wound for the moment.”
“I’m sorry” said Madison again.
Penny caressed her cheek with her hand and asked “What about your father? How will you find out why he was there?”

“Not sure. I’m going to write to them of course, that’s all I can do for now” said Madison thoughtfully.
“That’s a good idea” nodded Penny. She got up “Want to swing by the kitchens before our first class? We missed breakfast.”
“Yeah, let’s” said Madison who hadn’t eaten since lunch the day before.
They walked hand in hand to the kitchens.
“By the way Madison – the next time someone asks you to find a dragon with them, please just say no.”
“How about a basilisk?” asked Madison smirking and quickly sidestepped as Penny pushed her.

Chapter 18

“How’s your back?” asked Ben when they were all sitting down for dinner.
“Fine, I hardly feel it anymore” answered Madison. Truthfully her back was starting to sting again, but Penny was sitting next to her and she didn’t want to worry her. She probably needed to change her bandages again. She made a mental note to ask Rowans help once more after dinner. She didn’t want to give Madam Pomfrey the opportunity to start persuading her to stay in the hospital wing.
“Charlie hasn’t been able to shut up about the dragon” said Tulip “Talked my ear off all afternoon.”
“You should have said you were going, I would have come along” pouted Tonks.
“I didn’t know you had an interest in dragons?” asked Penny looking at Tonks.
“I couldn't care less about dragons. But a night ride into the Forbidden forest – that’s my kind of entertainment” answered Tonks.
“It was hardly entertaining. We were scared half to death. And besides – I didn’t know we were going until we were already in the air” said Madison.
“Still. To see a drago–“
“Ssshhhh!” whispered Rowan warningly.
“Miss Steward. The headmaster would like a word with you, please follow me, I will accompany you to his office.” Professor McGonagall stood next to their table, looking stern as ever.
Madison got slowly to her feet. Looking back she saw the worried eyes of her friends trailing after her.
Professor McGonagall walked so briskly across the corridors that Madison had to half-jog to keep up with her.
“Professor? Do you know what this is about?” asked Madison panting a little.
“The headmaster will explain everything to you in a minute” she answered formally.
“Sugar mice” said professor McGonagall confidently to the gargoyle guarding the entrance to Dumbledores office. “In you go miss Steward” she added, and without waiting on Madisons reply, turned to leave.
Madison rose with the stairs and knocked on the door.
“Enter” she heard the familiar voice call from inside. “Aah. Madison! It's a pleasure to see you again.”
Dumbledore smiled kindly at her and gestured to the chair in front of his desk. Madison relaxed a little. Surely he wouldn't be so gracious if

he was about to expel her.
“How are you?” asked Dumbledore conversationally leaning back in his chair and placing his hands together in front of him.
“I'm fine. Thank you!” answered Madison. After a brief pause she added “And how are you Sir?”
Dumbledore looked mildly surprised by this question but then chuckled “I am doing very well. Thank you for asking.”
He straightened himself a little and then surveyed Madison with a deliberate look. “I have asked you here today because there is a matter concerning your brother, that I feel obliged to talk to you about.” Madison was taken aback. She hadn't expected Dumbledore to mention her brother. She was sure, that he had found out about the dragon and was about to take house points or punish Madison in some way.
“He has been asking for you” said Dumbledore seriously.
“His conscious then?” asked Madison carefully.
“Not as such. He seams to drift in and out of lucid state. While he is present, he doesn't communicate with the healers nor with your parents. Lately though he has been calling your name.”
“Just my name? Does he say anything else?” asked Madison holding her breath.
“No, just your name” sighed Dumbledore. “This is the reason I asked you to see me today. Would you like to visit your brother, or would you rather keep your distance? Both choices are perfectly understandable. A hard decision to make I'm sure, but here we are. You may of course have time to think about it. If you have reached a conclusion, please let me know and I will help you in any way I can.” Dumbledore smiled at Madison reassuringly.
“My parents asked me not to visit” mumbled Madison quietly looking at the floor.
Dumbledore didn't answer her at once and she looked up. He wasn't looking at her, but at his fingertips and there was something hard in his usually amiable eyes.
“I was not aware of this” he said finally. “Does this affect your decision?” he asked quietly.
Madison considered this for a while. “No. I don’t think it does.”
Dumbledores mouth twitched.
“I think I want to go and see him” said Madison softly. “I know he’s done terrible things and he hurt Beatrice, but he’s also my brother, I can’t not go if he’s asking for me. I’m sorry” she finished feeling ashamed.
“There is no need to apologize Madison. In fact I was hoping you would come to this conclusion. Forgiveness is a great gift not many of us are lucky enough to receive. It takes a lot of strength to bestow this

gift, I am very glad that you have found that strength in yourself. Do you know when you would like to go?"
"The holidays are in a week, maybe I could go then? That way I wouldn't miss any more classes" suggested Madison.
"An excellent idea. Do you need for me to arrange transport in London or do you think you will come to some sort of an arrangement with your parents by then?"
Madison didn't really think that her parents would welcome her with open arms, but she also didn't want to get Dumbledore more involved in her family problems.
"I think I will be fine. But thank you Sir!" she added earnestly.
"Very well. That is settled then. If you need anything else, you need only ask" Dumbledore smiled at her.
Madison felt her insides turn. She could ask Dumbledore about her father. She could explain about the dragon. Maybe he would know something. Her parents were hardly a reliable source for information. She however didn't dare risk getting Charlie in trouble.
"Thank you again professor!" she said and got up to leave.

When she climbed down from Dumbledores office, she jumped in surprise. Penny, Tonks, Tulip, Charlie, Ben and Rowan were all waiting for her next to the gargoyle.
"What are you doing?" asked Madison startled.
"Has he chucked you out? If he has, I'll go straight up there and explain, that it was all my idea and that I forced you to come with me" said Charlie anxiously.
"No need. He didn't chuck me out. I don't think anyone knows about the dragon" said Madison reassuringly, looking around for signs of anyone eavesdropping.
The whole group let out a collective sigh of relief. Madison felt her heart grow at least two sizes. She looked at them all affectionately.
"Thanks for the support though" she added smiling at all of them.
"What did he want then?" asked Ben curiously.
"My brother has been asking for me. He wanted to know if I would like to visit."
"Oh! What are you going to do?" asked Rowan wide-eyed.
Madison glanced quickly at Penny, but looked away as soon as their eyes met. She had hoped, that she would have time to prepare for this conversation with Penny. Her brother had pulled Pennys sister into a cursed vault and tried to kill her. She had no idea how Penny would react to her wanting to visit him.
"I'm going to see him during the holidays" she said quietly looking at her shoes.
No one said anything at this. Everyone were sneaking peeks at Penny,

waiting for her to react. She was looking at Madison with an unreadable expression. Madison rubbed the back of her neck, but didn't look at any of them.
"I think that's very brave of you" said Penny steadily. Madisons head shot up and she looked at Penny in astonishment.
"He is your brother after all. But you have to promise to be careful with him, ok?"
Madison didn't care, that they weren't alone, didn't care that everyone were watching. She felt a huge swell of relief and gratefulness. She locked eyes with Penny and suddenly felt like the luckiest person alive. She stepped quickly over to her and pulled her close, kissing her firmly, trying to put the feeling into her kiss.
"Ooookey. That's our cue to leave" said Tonks smirking "Let's roll guys." Snorting and whispering, everyone left them and soon they were alone in front of the gargoyle.
Madison didn't even notice that her friends had left. She got lost in the kiss and her surroundings disappeared around her. Finally she withdrew from Penny and looked at her. Her eyes were still closed and her cheeks were pink, she leaned into Madison like she wasn't ready for the kiss to end.
"You are something else Haywood" she said affectionately. Penny opened her eyes and Madison could see her darkened pupils.
"Well, ditto" she said smiling "That was some kiss."
Madison smirked and wiggled her eyebrows "More where that came from."
"Lucky me" smirked Penny.
"No Penny" said Madison seriously "Lucky me."
They walked slowly down the corridor hand in hand.
"Oh damn" said Madison quietly.
"What?" asked Penny.
"I forgot to ask Rowans help with changing the bandage on my shoulder, she will be asleep by the time I'll get to the dormitory. Never mind, I'll ask her in the morning" explained Madison.
"Any reason why you didn't ask me to help you?" asked Penny sounding a bit hurt.
"Errr..no, no reason. I just didn't think that..." Madison didn't really have a good reason for not asking Penny.
"You can trust me you know. You don't have to keep me in a bubble. I want to be there for you for everything, I am your girlfriend after all, am I not?" said Penny, leaving no room for dispute.
"You're right. I'm sorry. Could you please help me change the bandage?" said Madison quickly, feeling remorseful.
"Of course" said Penny readily.
They headed towards the Gryffindor tower. The common room was

fortunately completely empty. Madison retrieved a spare bandage from her room, trying not to wake Tulip and Rowan and returned to Penny who was waiting for her downstairs. She handed the bandage to Penny and turned her back to her, pulling her jumper over her head. She stood in her tank top and jeans, waiting while Penny removed her old bandage and placed a new one. She took her time with the task and her hands lingered on Madisons shoulder blades and back, moving purposely, discovering. Finally they rested on her waist. She felt her skin tingle where Pennys fingers touched her.
“All done” whispered Penny, not letting go of Madisons waist. Before Madison could react, she felt a soft kiss on her shoulder.
“Thanks” she whispered back, not knowing what to do next. She felt very warm. The only sounds were the mild cracks from the dying fire. She turned around slowly. Pennys hands remained on her waist. She leaned down and kissed Penny softly. She responded immediately. The kiss was slow and gentle. Madison dropped her jumper and placed her hand at Pennys head, gradually caressing her cheek. Her other hand snaked around her back and pulled them closer together. When the kiss ended, Madison lowered her head and placed soft kisses at Pennys cheek, moving slowly down to her neck. She arched her head to give her more room and sighed faintly. Madison nuzzled into Penny and hugged her tightly. She didn’t want to let her go, it seemed to her, that pulling away would leave her incomplete somehow.
“Madison? Can I sleep here tonight? With you? It’s too late to sneak back to my dormitory anyway and...I don’t want to go” said Penny shyly. Madison pulled her head out of her neck and looked at her. “I mean sleep only” added Penny reddening.
Madison smiled happily. “That’s a brilliant idea. Come on!” she led Penny upstairs. The dormitory was dark, the only light came from the window. Penny removed her blouse and climbed into Madisons bed in her camisole. The bed was not large, but Penny snuggled so close to Madison, that there was plenty of room left over. Madison sighed contentedly and draped one arm over her. Penny kissed her neck softly and whispered “Good night.”
“Good night Penny” answered Madison, feeling that sleep was the last thing on her mind.

Chapter 19

Something was tickling Madisons nose. She jerked her head, but the tickling continued. She opened one of her eyes slowly and was met with bright sparkling blue staring back at her. She opened both of her eyes a little, still too groggy to comprehend what was going on.
"Good morning sleepy" said a soft voice. Penny Haywood was in her bed tickling her nose with her finger.
"I have to go back to my room now, I didn't want to leave without saying bye. You can sleep some more, it's still early."
Madison mumbled something unintelligible, still half-asleep. Penny giggled and kissed her cheek quickly.
"I'll see you at breakfast" she said getting up. When her warmth left her side, Madison realized what was going on and stumbled up also.
"I'llwalkyotodorrr" she said, blinking her eyes, still not succeeding in opening them completely. She followed Penny, staggering around the room, hitting her toes on every obstacle in the way and mumbling incoherently.
Penny chortled "Wow, you are NOT a morning person are you?"
Madison ran her hand over her face and forced her eyes open, keeping them as wide as she could.
"I'm up, I'm up. What's going on?" she asked looking wildly around the room and at Penny. She laughed out loud now and said slowly and clearly. "I just told you, that you can sleep. I'm going back to my room, you go back to bed. Everything is fine, I'll see you at breakfast."
"Oh, ok then. How did you sleep? Did you have enough room?" asked Madison trying valiantly to keep her eyes open.
"Yes, I slept splendidly. Now go back to bed, I shouldn't have woken you. I'll know better next time" said Penny winking at her.
"Ok. Good" muttered Madison, throwing herself back on her bed, face first, her eyes already closed.

Several hours later Madison woke for the second time that day. It took her a while to remember what had happened and why Penny was gone. When she finally did, she yawned and looked at the time. Squawking in surprise, she sprang up. Breakfast was nearly over and if she didn't hurry, she would not only miss food, but would also be late for her first class. She crabbed her towel and sprinted to the showers. Twenty minutes later she skidded in front of the main hall, her hair still damp. It was completely empty. She groaned loudly and dragged her feet away, she hated missing breakfast. She picked up her step as she didn't want to be late for potions as well. Fortunately she made it just in time. Madison sank into the seat next to Penny and looked at

her, feeling her mood improve considerably. Penny gave her a fleeting smile, already immersed in the lesson. She was copying Snapes instructions from the board into her notebook. With her free hand however, she reached into her bag and pulled out four neatly stacked slices of toast, wrapped into a napkin and pushed it towards Madison. She gaped at Penny and took the parcel stealthily.
"Thank you!" she whispered out of the corner of her mouth. Penny smiled, but didn't look at her. She was too absorbed in her favorite subject. Madison devoured the toast slices in a hurry so as not to bring the wrath of professor Snape on herself and hurried to catch up on the memory potion they were supposed to brew.
While she worked, she reflected on the previous night. She felt like she had discovered a new territory in her relationship with Penny. Her reaction to Madison going to visit her brother had made Penny feel closer to her than she had ever felt. Sleeping together had produced the result Penny had witnessed in the morning, as Madison didn't fall asleep until hours after they climbed into the bed. She had remained awake, watching Penny sleep and feeling the warmth from her slender body against her own. This was no mere crush, maybe it hadn't been for a long time. Madison was beginning to realize, while stewing her mandrake, that her feelings for Penny were growing deeper than she herself had recognized.

The next week passed in a whirlwind. Everyone were making plans for the holidays and chattering cheerfully about spending Christmas with their families. The teachers were not going along with the general cheer however, but kept up a relentless pace with loads of homework and assignments. Madison tried to manage her studies during the day as much as she could so she could have the nights to herself, but didn’t quite manage that. Rowan, Penny and her were regulars in the library during the last week and even Tonks and Tulip joined them begrudgingly. Madison and Penny didn’t manage to find free time to spend together all week and had to settle for joint study sessions.
On Wednesday, Madison skipped the study session to visit Hagrid. She had a special favor to ask of him. She wanted to go to the Forbidden forest once more. This time she decided, it would be best if she didn’t try to sneak in, but ask Hagrid for his help. He had once told her, that he sometimes found unicorn hair in the forest and used them for binding. Madison wanted to gather some for Penny as a Christmas gift. She knew, that unicorn hair was quite rare, but very useful for many potions. When Hagrid had heard her reasons, he gladly agreed to accompany her to the forest. On Wednesday evening they took off. Visiting the forest with Hagrid instead of flying above it, searching for a dragon left Madison feeling much more confident. It took a lot of

time however to find sufficient amount of hairs and Madison barely had time to get back before Filch closed the gates. She thanked Hagrid, who chuckled and said, that he had never visited the forest for such a romantic mission. Madison mumbled her thanks again and ran off with pink cheeks.
Thursday was the last full day in Hogwarts before the holidays as the express was leaving the next day. Barnaby had suggested, that they have a small party among themselves to celebrate and his idea was met with enthusiasm from all. Everyone were sick of studying and needed a brake to unwind. They decided to meet in Gryffindor common room and have the party there. Tonks and Tulip arrived with massive amounts of food and butterbeer, Rowan had magicked the common room so small white lights flew around them as if they were inside a snowglobe and Bill arrived with two bottles. One was Pinnock's Giggle Water and the other Ogden's Old Firewhisky. Madison was half-expecting Penny to confiscate them, but she only shrugged her shoulders and said
"It's the holidays. I'm pretending I'm not a prefect for one night."
Tonks gave a loud cheer hearing that and conjured glasses for everyone. Madison, Tulip, Charlie and Bill opted for the firewhisky, but Ben, Rowan, Tonks and Penny preferred the giggle water. Madison had had firewhisky before. She had tried it in secret with her brother when they were younger. The memory made her somber, but she was quickly brought out of her melancholy by the guffaws that started to exude from the giggle water drinkers. The night passed in general amusement and holiday cheer.
It was nearing midnight and they were all sitting around the fire, talking about the upcoming vacation.
"I can't wait to get back to my parents. I've really missed them this year. It's funny, when I was younger, I couldn't wait to go to Hogwarts, but now that I'm here, I miss home like crazy" said Rowan. Ben nodded in agreement beside her.
"I know what you mean. I miss my moms cooking the most. Don't get me wrong – the food here is great, but there's something about my moms Christmas pudding, that makes the holidays seem real to me" agreed Bill.
"Figures you would miss the food the most. What about our brothers and sister?" laughed Charlie.
"Yeah, them too of course, but the pudding..." answered Bill wistfully.
"I can't wait to sleep as long as I want in the morning. And no studying for two whole weeks" said Tonks excitedly.
"You understand, that we do have homework for the next semester, right?" asked Tulip smiling.
"Sush-sush. Don't wreck the Christmas spirit" waved Tonks at Tulip.

“Well I can’t wait to get to my uncles house. We’re going to Windermere lake for the vacation” said Barnaby happily.
“What will you do there?” asked Rowan.
“My uncle thinks that the lake might contain aquatic breathing werewolves” answered Barnaby.
“Well..that’s...nice” said Rowan, a bit thrown.
“What about you Penny?” asked Bill.
“I’m going to Innsbruck Germany with my parents. We’re going skiing” said Penny happily.
“And you Madison?” asked Charlie.
“Well I’ll visit my brother, but otherwise – no big plans” said Madison.
“Will you ask your father about the dragon thing?” asked Charlie.
“I’ll try. No guarantees that I’ll actually get an answer though” said Madison. She didn’t really want to think about her parents for as long as she could. She didn’t feel any special holiday cheer like her friends did. In her house Christmas evening meant that her parents left to one of their fancy gala-parties while Madison stayed at home with Jacob. And this year she would be there alone, if at all. She hadn’t told her parents that she was coming. She didn’t really mind their attitude, she was used to it after years of practice, but she didn’t want to bring the general mood down, so she stayed quiet.
The flames in the fireplace were slowly dying down and the party started to split up. Madison pulled Penny aside.
“Would you spend the night here again? We won’t see each other for two weeks and…?” she asked hopefully.
“Yes, I’d love to” answered Penny smiling brightly.
Rowan raised an eyebrow smirking, but didn’t say anything when Penny and Madison climbed to the girls dormitory together. Tulip looked at them for a second with sleepy eyes and said “No hanky-panky ok guys? I need my beauty sleep.” Madison rubbed her face with her hand blushing slightly, but Penny only scoffed benignly and climbed into Madisons bed.
She placed her head on Madisons chest and draped one hand over her. Madison sighed, feeling like this was the only true way to fall asleep.

This time Madison was the first one to wake. Fortunately Tulip and Rowan had already left for breakfast. They were probably trying to give them some privacy thought Madison, feeling grateful. She looked at Penny. She was settled half on top of Madison. One of her legs was thrown over her and her hand had shifted so that it was under Madisons shirt, laying on her bare stomach. Madison would have happily lain there for as long as she could have, but it seemed that Penny had sensed her waking. She opened her eyes a bit and moved her leg. “Good morning” she mumbled sleepily.

“Good morning to you too! How’d you sleep?” asked Madison.
“Like a rock” answered Penny and opened her eyes fully now. She saw her hand on Madisons stomach and pulled it away slowly. Madison missed the contact instantly.
“Sorry” said Penny a bit bashfully.
“It’s ok” smiled Madison raising herself on her elbows. Her abdomen was bare, her shirt rolled up a bit. Penny was staring at the place her hand had been with something in her eyes that Madison didn’t recognize. She looked down and saw that her scar from the vault was showing. It was healed, but still a little red. A thin line running down her left side. Madison pulled her shirt down quickly and covered her stomach in a hurry. Penny looked at her in confusion.
“What?” she asked.
“Nothing, I just...it’s ugly” said Madison shaking her head.
“What?” frowned Penny, now completely bewildered.
“The scar” said Madison. Pennys eyes widened in surprise.
“I wasn’t looking at your scar. I didn’t even notice it to be honest” she said.
“Oh. Then what...” asked Madison confused.
“I...er...you’ve been working out a lot lately haven’t you?” said Penny blushing.
Madison wasn’t sure they were having the same conversation anymore.
“Why? What are you talking about?” she asked.
“I forgot you’re so slow in the mornings” sighed Penny “I was looking at your abs ok?” she blushed and looked down.
“My..oooh” now it was Madisons turn to blush. Penny sat up looking serious all of a sudden.
“And about your scar? It’s not ugly. It’s marvelous. You saved my sisters life. That scar is a part of you that shows who you are as a person. The most wonderful person I have ever met.”
Penny pulled Madisons shirt gently up again and placed her hand on her scar.
“Do you hear me? Never call that scar ugly again!” she said heatedly.
Madison was at a loss for words. She just nodded mutely. They stayed like that for a couple of seconds – Penny sitting above her, with her hand on Madisons abdomen and her laying on her elbows, looking at each other intently.
Madison saw the ferocity in Pennys eyes slowly soften and turn into something else, equally as intense. Her hand on her stomach twitched a little and suddenly Penny climbed on top of Madison, straddling her and kissed her fiercely. Madison rose to meet her and wrapped her arms around Penny. This felt different from their previous encounters. Madison didn’t know why, the only thing she knew was that she could

not get close enough to Penny. She lifted her off of herself and placed her on the bed beside her, never braking their kiss. They laid side by side, arms and legs tangled around each other. Madison slipped her arm under Pennys shirt and brushed her back, at the same time pulling her closer. One of Pennys hands had returned to Madisons stomach and she yanked her shirt away once more forcefully. Madisons leg ended up between Pennys and instinctively she applied pressure. Penny half moaned and exhaled faintly, pressing herself even closer to Madison. Suddenly the door opened and Tulip sauntered in. Madison and Penny jumped apart like someone had used the knockback jinx on them.

“Oops! Sorry guys” said Tulip quickly “I’ll just take my sweater and be off in a jiffy.” She grabbed her sweater and walked back outside again. “Carry on!” she called to them, closing the door and snickering to herself.

Madison exhaled and looked at Penny. She was laying on her back, covering her face with the blanket.

“Do you want to pretend that didn’t just happen and go downstairs for breakfast?” asked Madison.

The bundle under the blanket nodded.

Chapter 20

Madison took a seat on the grimy looking tube and clutched her backpack. She had said goodbye to all of her friends and Penny on the Hogwarts express and left the platform quickly. Entering the muggle world, she walked determinedly to the nearest underground entrance. She didn't want to explain to everyone why her parents hadn't arrived to meet her for Christmas brake. She felt half ashamed of her parents and half scared at what they would say to her if they knew that she had come to London against their wishes. She waited for Holloway Road stop to go to St. Mungos. She had been to London on her own plenty of times. Her parents had given her a lot of freedom as a child when they visited the city and she had used it mostly to discover new places and walk around the streets. London felt familiar to her, like a distant relative she occasionally visited. She had thought it best for her to go to St. Mungos straight away. That way there would still be a chance that her parents would never know she had been there.
Getting off the train, she walked briskly to Purge and Dowse department store and whispering to the mannequin "Visiting Jacob Steward", she stepped through the glass. She had been to the hospital once before when she was five years old. Her brother had tested his own combination of enbublio and stinging jinx on her and her parents were unable to get her out of the bubble that had enclosed her.
She took the lift to the fourth floor and looked around cautiously. It was entirely possible, that Cassia and Silver were also visiting Jacob at the same time. The hallway was almost empty, only an imposing looking older witch sat on a bench near the wall.
"Hello" said Madison politely. The witch nodded her greeting with dignity and then observed Madison with a curious expression. Madison had a feeling that she would soon start asking questions about her name or background so she hastily entered the ward. On the doorway she bumped into a plump looking boy about six or seven years old. He mumbled his apologies and pocketed a candy-wrapper while passing Madison. Looking back she saw that the boy and the old witch were leaving together.
There were no other visitors in the ward. The healer whose nametag said Rosina Gears led Madison to a bed near a window.
Her heart thumping, Madison pulled back the curtains separating the bed from view. Her brother was laying on the bed seemingly sleeping. He was very white and his hair was a bit longer but mostly he looked the same as he had when they had last met in the vault. Rosina Gears whispered to Madison that he had yet to respond to any attempts at communication, but that the healers where trying to stir his mind with

a combination of memory charms and different potions. Madison nodded mutely and sat by his bed. Rosina left discreetly and pulled the curtains closed after her.
Madison sat still, looking at Jacob. She didn't feel angry at him, she wasn't scared anymore either. With a startling realization she understood, that the feeling most prevalent in her was pity. She had never pitied her brother before. She had always been in awe of him, had wanted to be like him, followed him where ever he went. But now, looking at him, she felt only sorrow and compassion. In a way, this new comprehension made Madison feel lonelier than she had before.
She leaned in and placed her hand on her brothers. A shudder went through her spine and her eyes rolled to the back of her head. The hospital bed with Jacob vanished from before her eyes and a white mist took over. She couldn't move or speak, she felt like her mind was floating and her body had disappeared into nothing. She didn't feel material anymore, she just existed in the mist.
"Madison. Listen to me" Jacob was speaking to her. She didn't hear his voice, but rather felt his words in her brain, felt his consciousness.
"You have to take me to the last vault." *Urgency*. Madison couldn't answer with words, but frantic thoughts were running through her mind and she felt them passing on to Jacob.
"It is the only way I'll get better. That's all I want, I promise. I'm weak, I'm trapped again, help me sister." *Desperation.* A turmoil of emotions shot out of Madison. Questions and apologies with accusations and doubt.
"I don't have time." *Impatience.* "Find me in Hogwarts." *Demanding.*
"Your blood is the key." Suddenly the white mist disappeared and Jacob was before Madison eyes once again. She jerked so forcefully, that her backpack fell to the floor. Jacob was awake, his eyes were open and staring at the ceiling. He didn't seem to be aware that Madison was there, his eyes looked empty and blank. He started muttering to himself very fast. Madison didn't make out what he was saying, it was too fast and inarticulate. She stood up, trembling and bent over her brothers face.
"Mdsnmadsnmdsn" she heard coming out of her brothers frothing mouth. She recoiled and took a step back. The healer Rosina returned and tutted compassionately. "Yes, I thought he might start that again, he does it every twenty minutes or so. He will calm down in a few minutes if you'd like to wait dear?" Madison shook her head and backed away from Jacob. She ran out of the ward not looking back.
Madison walked around the streets trying to calm down. She had ran out of the hospital in a daze, her only aim to get as far away from her brother as she could. She kicked a garbage can furiously, earning a

condemning look from passers-by. How could she be so stupid as to go back to him. She should have just kept her distance and try to forget about him. What had he meant by finding him in Hogwarts? Jacob was in St. Mungos, not at Hogwarts. How could she find him there? And what about her blood?
Madison felt suddenly exhausted. She dropped into a nearby bench and closed her eyes. Slowly her mind cleared. She knew that her anger had stemmed mostly from fear. Now that she had seen her brother, she knew, that she would never find peace unless she had done everything in her power to help him. But that was exactly the reason that made Madison feel like she was at least fifty years old, or well, really old in any case.
What about her parents? Should she tell them what she had learned? She definitely had to talk to Dumbledore in any case. That thought calmed Madison further. Dumbledore might help her untangle the mess her brother had left in her mind. He had done so after her last visit to the portrait. What about Penny and her friends? How would they react when they would learn, that another vault is waiting for its prey and Jacob once again seems to have a direct line to Madisons subconsciousness. She sighed and took a chocolate frog from her bag. She was getting hungry by now, the sandwiches she had eaten on the Hogwarts express felt like years ago. She had to go home.

She ran the doorbell. It didn't feel weird to do so in her own home. The house was foreign to her. There were no emotional connections binding her to the building. She had always felt like an outsider living here and so it was completely normal for her to enter it again as a visitor.
Her mother answered the door. Tall and dignified with an air of regality and a permanently contentious look, she raised her eyebrows. "Madison!"
"Hello mother" said Madison passively "I'm home for the holidays."
Her mother didn't move from the doorway. "I thought we had an agreement that you would stay at Hogwarts this year?"
"Changed my mind" shrugged Madison feeling increasingly tired.
Cassia Steward stepped slowly away from the doorway and gestured Madison inside.
"Your father is in the living room" she said.
Madison nodded slightly and moved inside. It would be better to get it over with, then maybe she could have some peace and gather her thoughts.
Silver Steward was sitting in an armchair reading when Madison entered.
"Madison! What are you doing here?"

“It’s the holidays dad” answered Madison quietly sitting on the sofa.
“But I was under the impression that you would not return this Christmas” said her father calmly.
“Well surprise!” Madison smiled sadly “I had things to do outside of Hogwarts anyways, made sense to come home.”
“Things to do?” her father raised his eyebrows “Not visit Jacob I hope.”
“No, shopping for school supplies” answered Madison dryly. She had resolved to not say anything about her visit to St. Mungos the moment she saw the expression on her mothers face when she opened the door. Cassia joined them and sat next to Madison, crossing her legs primly.
“Well, how are you?” she asked politely.
“Can’t complain. Been studying hard” answered Madison “What about you?”
“As our only son is incapacitated in St. Mungos at the moment, I can’t say, that we really feel the holiday cheer this year” said Silver coldly.
“Why did you not visit me?” the question burst out of Madison, surprising even herself.
“Excuse me?” asked Cassia.
“I was in the hospital wing for three days, unconscious after your only son attacked me. Why did you not come to see how I was?” Madison felt herself becoming angry.
“Well, you said it yourself. Three days? Jacob has been in St. Mungos ever since his encounter with you. And you’re alright now, aren’t you?” answered Silver.
“Dumbledore wrote to us about your condition. We couldn’t be at two places at the same time. Your brother was, IS in a worse condition” added Cassia looking at Madison.
“So you chose him” said Madison blankly.
“Don’t behave like a child Madison, you’re almost an adult. Jacob needed us more” snapped Silver.
“And didn’t you want to hear what happened in the vault? I could have told you what your son did in there” said Madison sneering.
“Dumbledore already informed us. But if you have anything to add to that, go ahead” answered Silver, starting to grow a little red around his neck.
Madison sighed. There was no point in this discussion. There where miles between her and her parents, a distance long enough, that Madison accepted it to be futile to try and make them understand.
“Never mind. I’m tired, I’m going to sleep” she said getting up.
“We are going out tonight. Check the fridge, there should be something there if you’re hungry” called Cassia after her.
“Thanks mom” said Madison. She turned around and looked at them.

“One more thing dad. Seen any dragons lately?” she asked. She had almost left without saying anything about recognizing her father in the Forbidden forest. Her visit to St. Mungos had pushed that particular question from her mind, it seemed trivial compared to what had happened to her in her brothers ward. As far as she was concerned, her father could go and wrestle acromantulas in the forest. But still, she knew it would bother her if she didn’t ask.
The impact of her question was obvious. Her mother winced, but kept her passive expression. Her father rose from his seat sharply and then slumped back, trying to look as if he had risen just to adjust his position.
“What on earth do you mean?” he asked in a would-be-calm voice.
Madison stayed quiet. It was obvious, that they would not tell her anything. She might as well stop asking now to not make them any more suspicious.
“Hagrid mentioned, that there was a dragon near Hogwarts recently. I was just wondering if you have ever seen one” she finally said in an offhanded voice.
“I have not. Nor have I any desire to do so. They’re dangerous beasts.”
“Right. Ok then, see you later” Madison left the room. Her parents remained seated, looking after her like statues in a museum exhibition.

Chapter 21

The next few days Madisons main activity was to try and avoid her parents. She didn't have any trouble at it because it seemed, that they were evading her as well. Cassia had come to her room to talk once, but the conversation was awkward and forced. She had asked about school and her progress and then remained quiet for a long period. Madison on her part tried hard to imagine how a normal conversation between a mother and daughter would go and finally blurted out, that she had a girlfriend. Her mother only raised her eyebrows and asked about Pennys last name.
"She's not a pureblood if that's what's troubling you" said Madison in a bitter voice. Her mother didn't answer, but didn't ask anything else either. She left the room soon after and Madison let out a sigh of relief.
Madison returned to London once more to shop for supplies. She needed potion ingredients and a new pair of dragon-hive gloves. She also had to pick up Rowans birthday present. She had put in a special order months ago and as Rowans birthday was coming up, she needed to go and pick it up. She had ordered a special set of gobstone marbles to be made. Gobstones was Rowans favorite game and she needed a new set as she played so often, half of her marbles were missing or scratched. Madison had asked for an exclusive, personalized smell to be added to the marbles. Usually the stones squirted out a foul smelling liquid when you lost a point, but these stones would spurt out only pleasant extracts. Madison had picked aromas she knew Rowan would appreciate like maple, old parchment, the smell of grass after rain, cinnamon rolls and cherries.
Madison also used the owl post office in Diagon Alley to send Penny her Christmas gift. She added a long letter to the parcel, but refrained from describing exactly what had happened in St. Mungos. She wanted to talk to Dumbledore before, mostly because she herself didn't understand what was going on and what Jacob had meant by what he said.
When Madison returned home she found the house empty. On the dining room table a hastily written note from her mother informed her, that her parents had left to visit their friends for a couple of days and that they would go straight to London from there, intent on spending Christmas with Jacob.
"Happy holidays and we'll see you next summer" was written at the end of the note. They had failed to remember Easter holidays. Madison briefly pondered if that was by accident or on purpose, but disregarded it quickly – it didn't matter much to her.

Madison stood thinking hard. It looked like another Christmas spent alone in an empty house. That was not a problem for her, she actually liked the quiet, but the urge to talk to Dumbledore was gnawing at her. She went to the kitchen and opened the fridge. It was almost empty. She would be much better fed at Hogwarts and she could seek out Dumbledore before the other students returned. Closing the fridge door with a slam she stomped to her room and packed her bag quickly.
She was about to leave the house when she noticed that her fathers study door was open. She almost never went into that room, even as a child. Generally her father kept that door locked but she also never had any interest in what he kept inside. But the image of her fathers tense look when she had mentioned the dragon swam before her eyes and slowly she entered the room. It was tidy and organized, the walls were covered with books and a large bureau table sat in the middle. The table was full of papers and newspaper clippings. Madison skimmed them briefly, but didn't make out any pattern or purpose for the content. Her fathers planner was open. Madison turned the pages to the date she had seen her father in the Forbidden forest.
"Lo7" was the only thing written on that day. Disappointed, Madison left the room and the house. She hailed the Knight Bus and payed for a ticket to Hogsmeade.

The school was very quiet. Only a handful of students had remained and the staircases and corridors were eerily quiet. Even Peeves was bored. His strategy for combating the monotony was to follow Filch around and sing dirty Christmas carols all day long. As a result, Filch was supremely miffed and Madison almost got detention for daring to return to the school early. Fortunately Filch had trouble yelling at Madison over Peeves's raucous crowing and she made herself scarce quickly.
Madison was glad she had returned. The school felt much more homely to her than her parents house had ever done. On the next day after her return, she strode to the gargoyle at Dumbledores office. Fortunately sugar mice was still a valid password and she reached the door.
"Enter" called Dumbledore from his office "Madison?" he said, surprise evident in his voice "To what do I owe the pleasure?" He had been standing near one of the tables with whirling mechanisms on it, but walked over to his chair and sat down.
"Hello professor" said Madison "I had something I wanted to discuss with you if that's alright?"
"Of course. Take a seat. Would you like anything to drink? Tea perhaps? Or pumpkin juice?" offered Dumbledore.

“Umm..tea would be nice, thank you” said Madison.
“So. You returned early? Eager to get a head start on your studies?” Dumbledore smiled while pouring Madison a cup of tea from a pot he had conjured.
“Errm..not exactly” said Madison hesitantly “I visited my brother.”
“How was he?” asked Dumbledore.
“Like you described. He wasn’t normal, I mean he wasn’t all there you know” said Madison taking the cup from Dumbledore. “But something happened.” Dumbledore didn’t say anything but surveyed Madison patiently over his spectacles.
“I touched his hand and then...then I wasn’t all there either. I couldn’t see anymore, there was some sort of a white mist or smoke around me and I heard...no, I sensed Jacob speaking to me” Madison felt like she wasn’t explaining herself satisfactorily, but Dumbledore only nodded and asked “And what did you feel him say to you?”
“He asked me to find him in here, in Hogwarts. He said I have to take him to the last vault, that it was his only chance to get better. He said...he said that my blood was the key” Madison looked at Dumbledore “That’s it, then he started chanting my name and looked like he was mad again.”
Dumbledore nodded, but didn’t say anything.
“Sir, do you have any idea what he was talking about? How can I find him in here, when he’s...well when he’s in St. Mungos. And how could I hear him at all?” asked Madison desperately.
Dumbledore sighed “I don’t have any definite answers to give to you. I can only offer guesses and estimations.”
“That’s ok” said Madison quickly.
“Well, it is my opinion, that the link between your brother and yourself persists. Partly because of your shared blood, but also because he, as a powerful legilimence, can open a door into your mind. His power seems to have grown weaker after the portrait vault however, as he needed physical contact to form a connection.”
“What about the last vault? Does he really need it to get better?” asked Madison.
“That I do not know. The vaults are ancient and uncharted. There is little knowledge about them to be found. I believe your brother is the leading expert on them, as only one who has visited them can express some concrete knowledge about the subject. What is known though, is that the vaults hold an ancient magic, that was concealed for the safety of all wizarding kind. You could surmise, that the intent of the magic in the vaults is not benevolent. Your brother thought that it could be controlled and even procured.”
Dumbledore sighed heavily “We can not be sure of anything your brother says to you, for his mind has been corrupted by the magic in

the vaults. The last vault might hold his cure, but it also might be a ploy to help him enter it."
"So I should do nothing?" asked Madison quietly.
"We must trust that the healers in St. Mungos can find a cure for your brothers condition. I would advise you not to contact him anymore. It seems probable, that he would try to persuade you again. As long as your brother has not found and entered the last vault, I don't think there is any danger from it to the rest of us. The vaults do not open for just anyone looking for them. Now that Jacob has bound his fate with them, the vaults are unlikely to accept a new contender."
Dumbledore observed Madison and added "I can say this about the vaults – each vault has shown increased levels of magic. The last vault that you went to, was crafted to trick the ones who dared enter it. It wasn't a matter of defeating an obstacle or a creature. The vault wanted you to give something up, something that was dearest to you. It shows the level of complexity in the inner magics of the vault that is very rare and sophisticated. I very much fear, that the last curse will be exponentially stronger and more dangerous."
Madison sighed. She wasn't surprised by Dumbledores advice, but it didn't make her feel any better. She still felt helpless and guilty for ignoring her brothers plea for help.
Dumbledore looked at her kindly "I understand, that this does not comfort you. It is not easy to do nothing, but sometimes it is the wisest choice of action to take."
"I understand" said Madison and got up "Thank you Sir! And for the tea also" she added.
"Any time" said Dumbledore smiling "It is a bit quiet during the holidays, I enjoyed the company, despite the topic of conversation."
Madison was about to leave the office when she remembered something and turned around.
"One more thing professor. Do you know what Lo7 stands for?"
Dumbledore looked at her with such an intense stare, that Madison felt like she was under and x-ray.
"Where have you encountered that abbreviation?" asked Dumbledore seriously.
"I saw it in my fathers notebook" answered Madison bewildered by his sober stance.
Something like understanding passed through Dumbledores eyes "Did you not talk to your father about it?" he asked.
"No. We don't...talk much" answered Madison "Why? What does it stand for?"
"Well, again – I can't be sure, but the abbreviation of Lo7 used to stand for an obscure underground order – The League of Seven."
"And? What did they do?" asked Madison confused.

“Their main purpose was to find the Cursed Vaults” said Dumbledore simply.
Madisons mouth opened and her hand, that had been reaching for the door handle slumped down.
“To find the vaults? Does this mean that my father is working with Jacob?”
“I have no idea. I don’t know your father personally and as far as the League goes, it hasn’t been active for hundreds of years. The last mention of them is from the eighteenth century. It is possible, that your father has been researching them in order to find something to help your brother.”
“Yeah…maybe” said Madison thoughtfully “Thanks again professor.”
“Thank you as well, for confiding in me. I will try to find out anything else I can of course. In the mean time – try and not put too much thought in the vaults Madison. They have claimed one mind from your family already” said Dumbledore with a concerned expression.
“I’ll try. See you at the feast professor” said Madison and left the office.

Chapter 22

On Christmas morning Madison woke late, feeling rested. The dormitory was quiet as she was the only one staying there. She laid in bed for a while day-dreaming and feeling rather cozy. She had a week before another term started and she had planned to make the most of her spare time. She wanted to finish all her homework early and go flying as much as she could. She also planned to check the library for any reference to the League of Seven. Thinking about what Penny would say to her news and the information about her brother and father, she worried that at one point Penny would have enough of her complicated family and the dangers they brought with them. Madison kept reminding herself however what Penny had said to her and sighed, missing the blonde haired girl profoundly.

During breakfast a weather-beaten owl dropped a package in front of Madison and flew off after drinking from her goblet. Madison ripped the paper off the package curiously. It was a Christmas gift from Penny. How her owl had known she was already back at school, she had no clue. The package contained a small round snowglobe, that showed a miniature version of Penny inside. She was standing in the middle of a city square, that Madison assumed was Innsbruck, and was dancing in the snow with her scarf twirling around her, occasionally blowing kisses at her. Madison stared at the miniature Penny affectionately. This was by far the best gift she had ever received. It did however make her miss Penny even more acutely. The letter attached did not help. Written in a familiar neat handwriting:

"Dear Madison! Happy Christmas! I wish you were here with me. Innsbruck is gorgeous, there are mountains everywhere and the city is full of history. The court palace called the Hofburg looks like something out of a fairy tale. I have been skiing so often now, that I'm not half bad anymore. I even manage to stand up most of the time. But even so, I can't wait to get back to Hogwarts. I miss you so much! Every time I see something beautiful or funny or even something ordinary – I want to tell you about it. I miss sleeping next to you. I found this old shop in an alley that makes these special snowglobes. I thought that way I could send a tiny version of myself to you to show you what's it like here. How are you doing? How is it going with your parents? Will I see you at King's Cross on the 1st of January? I can't wait! See you soon, Penny."

Madison re-read the letter a couple of times feeling warmth spread through her and a smile grow on her face. She missed Penny like crazy, but looking at the little version of her dancing and smiling made her feel better. She got up to write her a response. There was snow falling slowly outside her window. She smiled and placed the

little snowglobe on her dresser.
Christmas at Hogwarts far exceeded Madisons usual quiet holiday routine at home. It was still quiet in the castle, but the feast was rather snug. The tables were full of different dishes and small gifts and crackers. Dumbledore and professors McGonagall, Trelawney and Flitwick together with Madam Pomfrey sat at the same table with the few remaining students and Madison felt odd at how homely she felt, considering she had just left her home. When she finally toddled back to her dormitory she decided that she would spend all of her breaks from then on at Hogwarts.
The next days Madison slept in almost every morning, taking full advantage of having the room to herself. She busied herself with her homework and went to the room of requirements to train every evening. It was so cold outside, that she had no desire to go flying. So she studied and worked out until she was exhausted. She pushed herself harder than she had before, feeling gratified by the blissful weariness that settled into her.
On the evening of the last vacation day Madison got a surprise when she walked back to Gryffindor tower. She had trained for three hours straight and just came from the showers when she spotted Penny waiting for her at the portrait of the Fat Lady. When she saw Madison approaching, she ran to her and jumped in her arms.
“Penny? How? What are you doing here? I thought the express was coming tomorrow?” asked Madison completely dazed, holding on to Penny tightly.
“I convinced my parents that I needed to return early to study. I actually wanted to come back even sooner, but they didn’t want to let me go. So I just managed one evening. But I just couldn't wait anymore. I missed you so much!” explained Penny and hugged her firmly.
“I missed you too! I’m so glad that you’re here” said Madison “But I hope your parents were ok with this?” she asked with raised eyebrows.
“They were a bit disappointed at first, but they couldn't argue with me when I said that I needed to study. And it was only one night after all” smiled Penny brightly “And when I got your last letter and learned that you were already here, I just couldn't wait any longer.”
“I’m so happy to see you. Come on, lets go to my room and you can tell me all about Innsbruck” Madison took Pennys hand and said the password – *carpe vinum* – to the Fat Lady.
They sat on Madisons bed and Penny told her all about her trip. How she had gone to a concert at a castle and ridden funiculars to the mountains and visited the alpine zoo. She laughed when telling the story how an alpine ibex had eaten Beatrices hat. Madison listened to

her and laughed along, feeling so very full of happiness, that she thought she might burst. Penny looked so beautiful, her eyes were glistening and her cheeks were rosy and a little tanned from skiing. Madison couldn't help herself and leaned in and kissed her. Penny was taken by surprise, but she smiled into the kiss and wrapped her arms around Madisons neck and kissed her back gently. When the kiss ended she pulled back and asked smirking with a raised eyebrow “Is that your way of getting me to shut up?”
“No” laughed Madison “that’s just me, missing you.” Penny smiled and leaned back in for another kiss.
“I’m very glad you missed me so much” she laughed breathlessly when they pulled apart the second time.
“I did, very much” admitted Madison, placing small kisses on Pennys neck.
“Well if you let me go and change, I can come back and you can tell me more about how much you missed me” said Penny.
“You’ll stay the night?” asked Madison hopefully.
“If you don’t mind? I haven’t seen you for so long and Tulip and Rowan aren’t back either yet. I only thought I’d change into my nightclothes so I’d be more comfortable” said Penny tentatively.
“Of course! Go, get your clothes” said Madison enthusiastically, getting up.
“I should empty a drawer for your stuff, so you’d have somethings here if you needed them” she said looking at her dresser absentmindedly.
Penny was almost at the door when she looked back at Madison after hearing what she said. Madison was still eyeing the dresser contemplating on how to make room when she noticed that Penny was watching her.
“What? Go on. The password is carpe vinum” said Madison distractedly. Penny smiled at her tenderly and left. Madison pulled some drawers open to survey their contents and made plans to clean up the next day. Then she tidied the room a little. She put away her books and discarded clothes and straightened her blanket. She pulled on her gray checkered pyjama pants, but opted for a white tank top as it was rather warm in the room.
Penny entered soon after, now wearing her dressing gown. Closing the door behind her she said “Madison? How was your brother? You weren’t very specific in your letter.” Madison tightened, her mood dropping considerably. This was not the conversation she wanted to have with Penny on the first night they saw each other after two weeks.
“Fine. He was like Dumbledore said he’d be” she said avoiding Pennys eyes.

“Did he recognize you?” asked Penny carefully.
“Sort of” said Madison evadingly “Look, could we talk about it in the morning? I really don’t want to think about my brother right now.”
Penny surveyed her pensively. “Did something happen?” she asked quietly.
“We talked. Kind of...it’s hard to explain.”
“Did he threaten you?” asked Penny.
Madison sighed “No. He said some stuff to me, but nothing happened.”
“What did he say?” Madison realized, that Penny wasn’t about to drop this. It seemed, that she couldn't put off this discussion, so she slumped on her bed.
“He entered my mind again and said, that I have to help him enter the last vault, that it was his only chance to get better. Dumbledore said that I should do nothing however, that I should wait for the healers to cure him.” Feeling like she might as well get it all out Madison continued in one breath “And I saw the letters Lo7 in my fathers notebook written on the day I saw him with Charlie and I asked Dumbledore about it and it turns out Lo7 stands for the League of seven – an ancient order who wanted to find the cursed vaults.”
Madison took a breath and felt like the heaviness of reality had settled into the room. She looked at Penny warily. She was standing before her watching her seriously.
“Why didn’t you write to me about all of this?” she asked in a severe voice. Madison swallowed and felt her insides grow cold. This was what she had been afraid of. All of the madness of the Steward family was too much for Penny.
“It was a hard thing to write about. I wanted to talk to Dumbledore, I didn’t understand half of the things myself, still don’t as a matter of fact. I hoped I could sort it out a bit before I tell you” she said looking down.
Penny sat down next to her and looked at her a bit more kindly “You are so strange.”
Madison winced a little “I know, I know my family is” she started, but Penny put a finger on her mouth and continued “I mean you are so conflicting. There are moments you genuinely let me in and I feel so close to you, like just now with the drawer and then there are these times when I feel like you keep me at arms length, somewhere far away from your actual thoughts.”
Madisons eyes widened, this was not at all what she had expected.
“You are never far from my thoughts” she said slowly “You are most of my thoughts actually” she said reconsidering.
Penny smiled sadly “Why then do you not tell me when something like this is going on with you? Why do you want to keep me in the

dark?"
"I didn't want to worry you" said Madison feeling dread rise in her
"I'm scared that I will...I don't want to scare you away" she admitted grimly, not looking at Penny "I know what my brother is. I know what he has done. I understand that it's difficult to accept, especially for you after what happened with Beatrice."
"You are not your brother Madison" said Penny forcefully "You know what your brother is? Well I know who you are and nothing could scare me away" she pulled Madisons hand in her own "His actions don't change the way I feel about you" said Penny determinedly.
Madison blinked, she felt calmer now that she had told Penny everything. "So would you leave some stuff here if I made space for it?" she asked hopefully, looking at Penny with wide eyes.
Penny tilted her head and chuckled lightly "Yes, you doofus. Let's go to bed." She got up and removed her dressing gown. Madison gulped and felt her throat tighten. Penny was wearing lightblue two-piece camisole and shorts. Madison had to make a conscious effort not to stare and opted at blinking and looking at the ceiling with feigned curiosity. She drew the blanket back and climbed in, with Penny mirroring her actions on the other side of the bed. Madison turned off the light and they were lying in the middle of the bed for a while in silence, snuggled close together. Madison looked into the darkness, her eyes not yet accustomed and whispered:
"Penny? I meant it – you are never not in my thoughts. You are the best part of my thoughts." Penny didn't say anything but Madison felt her move next to her and her hot breath near her jawline. She kissed it gently and then moved to Madisons lips. Pennys lips were soft and tasted a little like toothpaste. Madison turned fully towards her and kissed her back. They kissed slowly and deliberately, their movements gentle and full of affection. The darkness surrounded them like a safe blanket, the only sounds were the occasional owls hooting outside the window. Pennys hand slipped under Madisons tank-top and she felt goose-bumps erupt where her hand trailed. Her own hand was tangled in Pennys hair, she moved it tentatively down, tracking Pennys back, but stopped before she reached her behind. Penny smiled and whispered, climbing on top of Madison "You're too mannerly". She took Madisons hand and moved it unto her own behind and resumed kissing her. Madisons heart skipped so many beats, that she was slightly surprised when she felt it pulse again. Penny had one hand in her hair and the other was exploring her chest under her top with increasing intensity. Madisons own hands were living a life of their own, she squeezed Penny slightly and pulled her closer into herself. Their kisses were turning increasingly deeper and more passionate. Madison felt Pennys hips start to grind slowly against her own core

and she mirrored her movements at once without thinking, her hand on Pennys behind keeping the rhythm. Soon they were both panting and their movements became more and more frenzied. Madison felt completely full of Penny, no intelligible thought remained in her mind besides Pennys lips and hands. Penny however pulled away from her slightly and said breathing heavily “Wait, we have to stop.”
Madison froze “What? What happened? Are you ok?”
“I’m fine. More than fine actually, but we have to stop, or else I can’t stop anymore. And…” Madison rather felt than saw Penny blush and understood at once.
“Oh. Yeah, you’re right. We should stop” she panted, trying to calm her breathing.
“It’s not that I don’t want to, it’s just…too fast” said Penny a bit nervously.
“No-no, you’re right. I’m sorry” said Madison nodding.
“Will you stop apologizing for things that are not your fault” said Penny smiling into Madisons neck.”It was my fault, you were very…civil…At first.”
Madison scoffed chuckling “I’ll have you know, that I’m always very civil” she pulled Penny into her side “And you’re right. When it’s time, it’s time, there’s no rush.” They were lying against each other, hearts slowing down to a normal rhythm and breathing growing slower and steadier. Madison felt herself getting sleepier by the second.
“You don’t always have to be civil with me by the way” said Penny into her ear flirtingly. “Good night!” Kissing her, she draped her arm and leg over a now wide awake Madison.

Chapter 23

The next day, the school came back to life after a two week slumber. The students poured into the corridors and hallways after noon when the express arrived. Madison wondered if the noise was always so deafening or if it only seemed so to her because she had gotten used to the quiet. Rowan and Tulip spent no time in asking her about Jacob and she filled them in briefly and quickly. Madison didn't want to think about her brother or her parents. Every time someone mentioned them or asked about them, she felt tired and guilty. She wanted to forget about her family and follow Dumbledores advice. After all, there was nothing she could do. She had no clue what Jacob had meant when he asked her to find him and she didn't really want to think about the part about her blood being the key to the next vault. So she answered all questions, but diverted the conversation quickly, making it clear that she didn't want to discuss it any further. At the dinner table Madison sat next to Tulip, Penny and Tonks and looked around for Rowan. Fortunately she hadn't arrived yet. Madison gestured hastily to Barnaby, Ben and the Weasley brothers to join them.

"Guys, listen. We have to talk quickly, Rowan might come at any minute" said Madison looking anxiously at the main doorway.

"I'm sure she won't mind if we talk quickly, she can keep up, don't worry Madison" said Barnaby sitting down next to Tonks.

"No I mean, we have to talk about something before she arrives" smiled Madison.

"Oooh. Secrets. Well? Spill Steward" said Tulip eagerly.

"It's Rowans birthday tomorrow. And I thought we might throw her a surprise party. What do you think?" asked Madison looking around the group.

"That's a brilliant idea!" said Tonks brightly.

"Yeah! Excellent!" beamed Charlie and Bill nodded beside him.

"Ben what do you think?" asked Madison.

"I think it's a good idea too, as long as we don't scare her" said Ben.

"So all agreed? Tomorrow night at Gryffindor common room?" asked Madison.

"We should probably do it somewhere else. It will be hard to set up the party in there without her seeing us" said Penny "What about Hufflepuffs common room? We can set it up there and I can ask her to come help me study or something?"

"Perfect!" said Madison

"What about a cake?" asked Barnaby "We will need a birthday cake, won't we?"

“Well I’m sure if we ask the house-elves in the kitchens, they would be willing to help” said Bill pensively.
“Or better yet – let’s make the cake ourselves. It would be more special if we made it, don’t you think?” asked Charlie.
“You’re right, it would. We can go to the kitchens and make it there. Rowan never goes there so we won’t get caught” said Penny eagerly.
“Right, I’ll bet Pitts will help us with ingredients and stuff, he’s a nice dude” added Bill.
“Ok, but no one’s going to jump out of it right?” asked Ben dubiously.
“Now there’s an idea!” said Tonks perking up.
“No!” said Madison, Penny, Tulip and Charlie in unison.

All of them had a tight schedule the next day. Madison ran to the kitchens after her first class and hauled a case of cornish pasties and sandwiches to the Hufflepuffs common room. Penny was waiting for her at the entrance and tapped her wand at the right barrel to open it. Hufflepuffs common room didn’t have a password, but required a wand to be tapped at the correct barrel in the right rhythm. Madison was late to her next class, but the reprimand she got from professor McGonagall washed over her, as she still felt Pennys lips on her own and smiled.
Bill had a free period and sneaked away, returning with a case of butterbeer and a huge box from Honeydukes, filled with all sorts of different sweets. Ben and Penny cleared a space for them in the common room and hung up streamers, balloons and a huge sign that flashed “Happy birthday Rowan!” while squeeking the birthday song. Penny did however cast a silencing charm on the sign so as not to annoy her fellow hufflepuffs before the party. Tulip and Tonks passed an innocent looking box to Penny to leave in the common room as well. Penny eyed the box suspiciously.
“How many things in there that I should be confiscating?” she asked.
“Only a few items to liven up the party, don’t fret” winked Tulip.
“If you’re worried we can go back to the original plan and I can jump out of the cake as entertainment?” offered Tonks.
“That was never part of the original plan. Oh never mind, give it here” huffed Penny and took the box into hufflepuffs common room.
“What’s in it?” asked Madison chuckling.
“Only some non-explodable balloons, filibuster’s fireworks, whizzing worms, screaming yo-yos” listed Tulip.
“Ok, ok I get the picture. Basically the whole box should be confiscated” said Madison.
“It just was. Didn’t you see? A prefect just took it from us” smiled Tonks mischievously.
“Yeah, and we learned our lesson” snickered Tulip.

Madison snorted with laughter and shook her head. When Penny reemerged, they went to the kitchens. Ben, Charlie, Bill and Barnaby were already there. Bill was talking to Pitts and they seemed to have come to an agreement because the house-elves waved them over to an empty table and started bringing different kinds of bowls and containers to them. Pitts brought them supplies for the cake and wished them good luck with a slight bow. The other house-elves were sneaking peaks at them while working and giggled amongst themselves. They had opted for the black forest gateau as it was Rowans favorite. Making the cake was a blast. Soon they were all covered in flour and baking powder and Bill had to use the cleaning charm on Barnabys fingers as they were stuck together, coated in sugar syrup. Pitts agreed to send the cake up to the Hufflepuffs common room and they left after cleaning up after themselves and thanking all the house-elves.
Madison stayed in the hufflepuff common room with the others while Penny went to fetch Rowan. The hufflepuffs around them were all as excited as they were. Most of them knew Rowan as well and planned to join in with the celebration. They hid behind the couches and armchairs as best they could and dimmed the lights. After a lot of giggling and shushing they heard the tapping on the barrel and Pennys voice when it opened "...I know, but I seem to have some sort of a mental block with this spell and I figured since you had a handle on it you might be able to help." Rowan and Penny entered to room and they heard Rowans voice "Why is it so dark in here?"
"Surprise!" they shouted and jumped out from behind their hiding places. Rowans eyes went as round as saucers and slowly a huge smile started to spread on her face.
"What is this?" she asked looking around.
"Happy birthday!" was heard from all around the room.
"It's a surprise party. For your birthday" said Madison.
"This is amazing! You did all of this? Thank you guys!" Rowan was grinning from ear to ear now, a little misty in the eyes.
"I hope we didn't frighten you?" asked Ben carefully.
"No, only took me by surprise. So job well done I guess" answered Rowan.
Madison hugged Rowan tightly and whispered into her ear "Happy birthday!" Rowan just sighed and looked at her happily. The others took their turns hugging Rowan and congratulating her. When they were all done, Tulip lit some of the Filibuster's fireworks and passed the remaining contents of the box around the room to the great delight of the younger hufflepuffs, who wasted no time in trying all the different kinds of banned items. They ate pasties and sandwiches and tested the Bertie Botts every flavor beans. Madison got an ink

flavored one on her first try, but Ben was unlucky enough to get chili, beet and kidney beans trying to score a strawberry flavored one. About an hour into their gathering, four house-elves arrived carrying the black forest gateau they had made. When Rowan declared the cake to be the best one she had ever tasted, the group let out a collective sigh of relief. They sat around the fire, eating cake and talking. Rowan slumped into the couch next to Madison with her second slice of cake.
“This night is amazing. I’ve never had a surprise party before” she said.
“I’m glad you like it” smiled Madison at her.
“And the marbles too. I feel very spoiled” said Rowan gratefully.
“The marbles are a gift to all of us really. So thanks Madison!” piped Tonks from the chair next to them.
“Yeah, I’m actually looking forward to having a game with Rowan, now that I don’t have to shower immediately after” said Charlie.
“Dance party!” shouted a third year hufflepuff suddenly and turned up the volume on the radio. Everyone got to their feet and bounced around the common room in a complete disarray, bumping into each other and flinging their arms around.
Penny ducked under Bills arms and reached Madison. She took her hand and pulled her covertly inside a room behind a round door.
“What’s wrong?” asked Madison confused when Penny shut the door after them.
“Nothing. I just wanted to have you to myself for a moment” smiled Penny. She took Madisons hands and pushed her against the door gently while kissing her.
“We haven’t been able to be alone since this morning” she said between kisses on Madisons neck.
“Uhuh, right. Good thinking” said Madison distractedly as Penny was sucking on her earlobe. Feeling bold thanks to the previous night, she placed both of her hands on Pennys behind and pulled her into herself. Penny smiled, but continued kissing her neck while her hands tugged Madisons shirt upwards and slid underneath it. Madison started to feel lightheaded. Pennys lips on her neck sent chills throughout her entire body. Without thinking Madison lifted Penny up and turned them around so Pennys back was against the door. Penny smiled and pulled her face towards her, kissing her deeply. Madison again had the sensation, that her hands were moving of their own will as one of them slipped under Pennys blouse. Her stomach was warm and defined. Madison felt her muscles tremble under her fingers when she traveled over them. Moving upwards she was met with the swell of her breast and cupped it gently through her bra. Penny arched a little and grabbed Madisons rear with more force, pulling her closer.

Trying to keep her mind from going into overdrive again, Madison resumed kissing Penny more slowly. One hand around Pennys waist and the other under her blouse, she gradually moved her hand around Pennys chest, going in slow circles around her breast. She took her time, her hand moving carefully, getting to know every curve on its way, memorizing the path. Penny breathed shakily and tightened her hold on Madisons backside. Slipping her hands into Madisons back pockets, she started a slow rhythm between their hips. Cupping her breast again, she felt Pennys nipple harden under her palm. Madison swallowed and slid her thumb over the bud gently. Penny inhaled sharply and pushed her chest towards Madisons hand. Madison felt like she had about one brain cell left, that wasn't occupied with Penny. Unfortunately that one cell was screaming to her, that she had to stop. Gathering all of her almost non-existent willpower, she pulled away from Penny, breathing heavily.
"Uhhh...I think we need to stop again" she said, looking down at Penny. She stared back at her with glazed eyes and pink cheeks, her chest heaving.
"Yeah, we do" she answered breathlessly, straightening herself "we should get back to the party before they notice we're gone." She placed her hands around Madisons face and kissed her chastely.
"Not so civil anymore are you?" she remarked smiling.
"I don't know what you are talking about" answered Madison trying to look innocent, but smirking nonetheless. They smoothed over their clothes and were just about to leave the room when Madison felt her head grow impossibly heavy all of a sudden.
"Wait a moment" she said to Penny. She halted at the door and looked back. Madison shook her head and the feeling disappeared.
"What's wrong?" asked Penny, her hand on the door handle.
"Nothing, I just-" the feeling returned forcefully. Madison blinked, the edges of her vision blurred over in a white mist and she felt her legs tremble under her.
"Madison?" asked Penny moving toward her. Her worried face swam in and out of focus in front of Madisons eyes. She fumbled around for a place to sit, but didn't find anything. Her legs too weak to carry her, she sank unto the floor and sat down, pressing her head on her knees.
"What's wrong?" she heard Pennys voice sounding from afar. A sudden sharp pain pulsed in her brain and for a moment she thought she would black out. But then another voice rang in her ears, sounding much closer than Pennys had.
"Listen to me Madison. You have to find me. Our bond is unbreakable. Don't fight it." Just as suddenly as it had appeared, the mist evaporated and her head felt light again. She opened her eyes and looked around. Penny was kneeling beside her, her face full of fear.

“Are you ok? What’s the matter?” she asked, sounding panicky.
Madison got to her feet and pulled her hands over her face, rubbing her eyes.
“I’m ok. It’s gone” she said.
“What’s gone?” asked Penny getting up also.
“I think it was my brother. He spoke to me again” said Madison pinching her fingers over the root of her nose.
“What did he say?” asked Penny in a scared voice.
“This has never happened before. He used to speak to me in my dreams” said Madison more to herself. “He said I have to find him again. He said I shouldn’t fight our bond” she added to Penny. Her head was still throbbing and she squinted her eyes against the light.
“Are you ok?” asked Penny again observing her.
“Yeah, just a headache” said Madison “I think I’ll go to sleep early tonight.”
“You should tell Dumbledore what you heard” said Penny, still looking startled.
“I will. I’m sorry if I frightened you” said Madison now looking straight at Penny. Penny waved her hand dismissively “Are you sure you’re ok?”
“Yes. I’m ok, it just surprised me too. It’s weird having more than one person in my brain you know” explained Madison. “Come on, let’s go and see how the party is going.” She took Pennys hand and led her back to the common room. Rowan was leading a very boisterous conga-line and wearing a party hat when they entered. Madison sat on a nearby couch and took a swig of butterbeer. Penny sat beside her, looking at her with concern evident in her eyes.
“Look, I’m totally fine” yelled Madison to Penny over the noise. “I’m just tired. Will you say to them that I went to bed early. I don’t want to disturb Rowan right now.”
Penny touched Madisons forehead and looked at her intently before agreeing. Madison kissed her cheek quickly and left the party.

Chapter 24

The next morning Madison was the first one at breakfast. She didn't know how long the party lasted after she left, but when she woke, Tulip was snoring loudly and Rowan was sleeping with her party hat still on.
Madison shoveled her porridge down almost forcefully. She was feeling grumpy and wanted to get to the room of requirements so that she could relive her frustration on the punching bag. Her foot was tapping under the table and she looked around scowling to herself.
“All alone hero? Where's your prefect?” smirked Merula passing by her table.
“Sod off!” said Madison not looking at her.
“What's gotten into you?” Merula stopped and raised her eyebrows.
Madison sighed. Merula and her didn't always get along, but during the last few years the proud slytherin had outgrown her childish feud with Madison and their meetings were limited to only teasing remarks and playful jabs.
“Sorry. I didn't mean to bark at you” she mumbled.
“Fight with the blonde?” asked Merula.
“No. Just woke up on the wrong side of the bed I suppose” shrugged Madison.
“Well get a grip on yourself” huffed Merula and started to walk away. She paused after taking a few steps and turned back to Madison.
“You know what helps me when I feel like this?” she asked leaning on Madisons table.
“You mean always then?” replied Madison smiling.
“Shut it, I'm trying to give you advice here ok?” said Merula “Fighting helps” she said simply.
Madison stared at her “Is that why you're always fighting?” she asked frowning.
“Sometimes. Other times I do it for fun or for practice. It doesn't matter. My point is, that fighting makes you feel better.”
“Maybe so. It won't work for me” said Madison dismissively.
Merula squinted her eyes at her “Fight me, I'll show you.”
“What? Oh come on Merula, I thought we were past this” said Madison annoyed.
“It's not like that. I could prove to you it helps. But suit yourself, brood away for all I care.” Merula walked away. Madison watched her go and felt her leg start tapping again.
“Merula! Wait!”

They went to the field next to the greenhouses, calculating that they

would be empty this early in the morning.
“Ok. Draw your wand” said Merula and took out her own wand, pointing it at Madison. “Since we both have classes after this and don't want a big hassle, I'll try to contain myself to not harm you too severely.”
Madison scoffed. She had beaten Merula in duels countless times by now so she understood her dig to serve as a warning for Madison to not use really harmful spells either. She pulled out her wand and pointed it at Merula. They smiled at each other, it felt like old times. Suddenly Merulas wand flashed in the air and she yelled “Flipendo!” Madison jumped to avoid the spell and yelled mid-jump “Levicorpus!” Merula managed to cast a shield in front of her that absorbed the jinx. Madison didn't stop however, she pointed her wand again and yelled “Titillando!” This time she was successful, her spell shot through Merulas weakened shield and hit her. She dropped to the ground laughing uncontrollably and holding her stomach. Madison waved her wand at her and said “Finite incantatem” and walked back a few steps to give Merula time to get up and resume her position. From behind her she heard Merulas voice “Tarantallegra!” and felt her jinx hit her square in the back. Instantly her legs started to dance to a silent beat, flailing about violently. Madison looked at Merula exasperatedly. She was obviously enjoying herself. Standing with her hands crossed on her chest and a wide smirk on her face “Nice moves Steward!” she laughed. Madison cursed herself silently. What kind of an idiot would turn her back on Merula Snyde during a duel. “Finite incantatem” she finally heard Merula yell and felt her legs stop moving instantly. She almost toppled to the ground from the sudden change in movement, but knew better than to underestimate Merula for a second time. With one knee on the ground she waved her wand in front of herself and said “Protego!” She had been right. The second her shield erupted, she heard a steleus jinx hit it. She didn't waist any time and bellowed standing up “Expelliarmus!” Merulas wand flew away from her hand and Madison grinned victoriously. “This is not over Steward!” fumed Merula looking around for her wand. “You were right Merula, I feel much better!” shouted Madison back at her beaming. She did feel better, not because she had beaten Merula, but because she had stopped thinking about her brother for a few moments. She had been completely focused on Merula and the duel and everything else had dropped away from her mind. Fresh energy filled her, adrenaline pumped in her veins and she was just about to ask Merula to have another go when she saw something that made her heart sink. Professor Sprout stood at the door of greenhouse four and looked upon them severely.
“Dueling girls? I'm afraid this means detention” she tutted “And this

early in the morning too...I haven't even had my pancakes yet."

"How on earth did you manage to get into trouble this early?" asked Tonks suppressing a yawn. They where walking to transfiguration, Madison had just left professor Sprouts office where she had handed both her and Merula a weeks worth of detention. They were supposed to work in the library every evening, starting immediately.
"Did Merula goad you into it?" asked Rowan.
"No she didn't. It was my own fault" said Madison glumly.
"Tough luck though. Sprout doesn't like duelling, you would have fared better had Flitwick caught you" said Tonks.
"Did Merula get the same punishment as you did?" asked Rowan.
"Yeah. We both have to dust and shelf books for a week" answered Madison.
"Does Penny know?" asked Tonks.
"No, haven't seen her. Why?" asked Madison.
"Oh no reason" smiled Tonks mysteriously. Madison saw Rowan roll her eyes at Tonks. She was just about to ask Rowan what's going on when professor McGonagall ushered them inside the classroom and closed the door behind them with a loud bang.
She didn't have a chance to talk to Penny during the day. At seven o'clock she trudged to the library. She met an equally sullen looking Merula at the door.
"Listen Merula. I'm sorry you got detention because of me" said Madison before they entered the library.
"You should be. Last time I try to offer advice" said Merula in a miffed voice, but then bumped her shoulder to Madisons "At least I know you're suffering also."
"Yeah, glad it's a comfort to you" Madison smiled at Merula.
Madam Pince was waiting for them. She led them between the shelves, where on one of the tables the books used by students were laid out. The pile was huge and the books were very dusty. Madison and Merula sighed and got to work. They worked in silence at first, but when Madam Pince was convinced that they understood her system, she went into her office, leaving them on their own. It wasn't half-bad spending time with Merula. While proud and insolent, Merula also had a quick wit and a good sense of humor. They spent time chatting and mocking each other playfully and ten o'clock arrived sooner than Madison had dared to hope. She said goodbye to Merula and returned to Gryffindor common room.
The next day was as busy as the one before that. Penny had been looking for her the previous night and Rowan had informed her about Madisons detention. They finally saw each other at potions.
"It's too bad you got detention, but why were you duelling Merula in

the first place?" asked Penny when they waited for Snape to arrive.
"We were testing a theory, she was helping me" answered Madison.
"And how did last night go?" asked Penny.
"Not too bad surprisingly. I'm even glad Merula's there. Pinces system is ludicrous, but we actually had a laugh yesterday" said Madison shrugging. For some reason Penny looked peeved at that information.
"What about your brother? Did you tell Dumbledore?"
"Didn't have time. I will soon. It's not like it's crucial information" said Madison.
"You never know. You should go when you get a chance" said Penny sternly.
"I will. Hey – are you free Saturday? Fancy going to Hogsmeade?" asked Madison eager to change the subject.
"Sure. It's been a while, I could use some fluxweed, we can go to Dogwead and Deathcap."
Madison smiled at Penny "How have you already run out of ingredients? The term just started."
"I've been testing with N.E.W.T - level potions. They are fascinating, but they do eat through my stock fast" explained Penny.
"Silence!" bellowed Snape who had just entered the classroom.
Madison turned towards him, it was impossible to talk when Snape was present. Partly because she didn't want to add days to her detention, but also because Penny was so concentrated, that there was no point in continuing the conversation.

Madison saw Penny only briefly during the next couple of days. She had her schedule full and her evenings were spent in the library. On the last night of her detention Madison was placing a book called *"Refiguring and configuring transfiguring"* back to the shelf when she noticed a thick book with a title on its back *"Ancient orders"*. She pulled the book out and leafed through it. Under the letter L, she found a small paragraph titled "The League of Seven". She sat down and placed the book on her knees.
"The ancient order who name themselves the League of Seven has made it their purpose and goal to find the legendary cursed vaults located in Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. How long the order has been operational is not noted. Little else is known about them. They presumably took their name from the seven vaults. Unconfirmed legends say, that one of the members of the order will birth the one with the potential and the lineage to enter the vaults and harness the powers that dwell within."
Merula stood behind Madison and looked over her shoulder.
"Why are you looking up Lo7?" she asked.
"You know about them?" asked Madison incredulously.
"Yeah. Don't you?" asked Merula frowning.

“Nothing else but what’s written here. How do you know about them?”
“My parents were members” said Merula looking confused. Madison looked at her with her mouth hanging open.
“Your parents were members? How do you know?” she asked her, completely baffled.
“Duh! They told me of course. Didn’t yours?” asked Merula, looking equally confused.
“No. I don’t even know for sure if they are members” said Madison, her head swimming.
“I’m pretty sure they are” scoffed Merula “I mean look at your brother. He’s the chosen one isn’t he?”
“What? What do you mean the chosen one?” asked Madison getting more and more bewildered by the second.
“You really have no clue don’t you?” asked Merula looking at her skeptically. “You’re more dim than I thought, who knew.”
“Merula. Will you just tell me what you know?” said Madison angrily.
“Hold your hippogriffs hero” said Merula rolling her eyes. Sighing resignedly she said “My parents hoped I would be the one who would find the vaults you see. Well that ambition was crushed by your idiotic brother as you know, so I figured that your parents must be members as well. The prophecy says that only a descendant of a member of the order and a pureblood can find the vaults. Your brother couldn’t have entered them otherwise.”
“There’s a prophecy?”
“Supposedly yeah. I never heard it, but I remember my parents telling me about it.”
“Wait. Is that why you hassled me when we first met?” asked Madison feeling something click in her brain.
“Well your brother wasn’t around, so you were the next one in line. I can’t say I liked being left out, my parents would have been really proud if I had found the vaults” said Merula wistfully. “I’m over it now however” she said with bravado “and considering how your brother is doing I think I lucked out.”
Madison sank into a chair, completely drained by the flux of information. Merula looked at her with something resembling pity in her eyes. “You don’t talk much with your parents huh?”
“Not much, no” answered Madison quietly.
“Funny. Not how I pictured your family at all” mused Merula.
“Your parents really wanted you to find the vaults?” asked Madison looking up.
“Of course. They are supposed to hold great powers, who wouldn’t want that.”
“But they are incredibly dangerous. I mean look at what has happened

since my brother opened them" said Madison in disbelief.
"I can hold my own Steward" scoffed Merula and sat next to her. They remained silent for a while. Madison was staring straight ahead blankly. Her parents had known all along. They might have even given Jacob the idea and encouraged him to pursue the vaults.
"So is your brother really cracked now?" asked Merula tentatively.
"Sort of" shrugged Madison. It was weird, but it felt really easy to talk to Merula about her brother. She didn't feel any guilt or shame with her. She considered the brown haired witch next to her.
"And your parents are in Azkaban now?" she asked carefully.
"Yeah" she answered simply. They sat in silence again.
"Families can really suck sometimes" said Merula finally. Madison laughed "They really-really can" she agreed.
"Ok, enough of this touching heart-to-heart crap for me. We're done with our detention, I'm out of here" said Merula suddenly and got up. Madison looked at her "Hey Merula? Thanks!" she said sincerely.
"Don't get soft on me" answered Merula and scoffed at her almost kindly.

Chapter 25

Thanks to the nights spent in the library, Madison was hopelessly behind on her homework. So she had to return to the library again the next night to study. Fortunately Penny joined her. They had seen so little of each other during the last week, that spending time in the library together seemed like a real treat for both of them. Madison quickly filled Penny in on what she had learned about the league and her parents. She was almost as shocked as Madison had been.
“And you never knew?” she asked with wide eyes.
“No, they never told me anything. Neither did Jacob come to that” said Madison miserably. “Merulas parents told her about the vaults when she was a kid.”
“Well that’s not much better when you think about it” said Penny frowning.
“I mean, that they talked to one another. Merula was right, families can really suck” sighed Madison opening her astronomy chart. Penny remained quiet for a while and Madison started to mark the planets on her parchment.
“So you talked about your brother with Merula?” she asked in a casual voice.
“Huh? Oh yeah. She asked about him. It’s actually funny. Merula and I have a lot in common when you think about it” answered Madison looking up from her chart.
“What do you mean?” asked Penny frowning slightly.
“Well we both have complicated families that are..err..problematic. And it turns out both of our parents belong to this stupid league. In a strange way, it made it easier to talk to her, you know?” explained Madison dipping her quill into her ink bottle.
“Well I’m glad you finally found someone to bond with” snapped Penny. Madison looked at her. She didn’t meet her eyes, but stacked her books on the table with vigorous movements, looking really angry for some reason.
“Penny?” asked Madison gingerly “What’s the matter?”
“Nothing’s the matter. I’m really happy that you and Merula found out you have sooooo much in common. It’s great you have someone you can talk to about your messed up families.” Madison shrank a little in her chair. Penny froze and looked at her with startled eyes. “I’m sorry! I didn’t mean it like that.”
“It’s ok. My family is messed up. But why are you upset?” asked Madison feeling dumbfounded.
“I’m not upset. I'm fine” Penny looked more sad than angry now “I think I’ll finish this in my room, I’m tired” she got up and left the

library quickly. Madison looked after her in confusion.

When she finally got back to her dormitory, Tulip was already asleep. Rowan was in her bed reading.
“How’d it go? Got anything done?” asked Rowan looking up.
“Not much” sighed Madison and threw her backpack under her bed.
“Did something happen?” asked Rowan.
“Yeah. I think I got into a fight with Penny” said Madison miserably sitting on her bed.
“About Merula?” asked Rowan.
“How did you know that?” asked Madison surprised.
Rowan smiled slightly “Tell me what happened.” Madison told her what Penny and her had talked about. “And then she said she’s really glad that Merula and I have so much in common and we can talk and stormed off” finished Madison. “I mean – what was that all about?” she asked exasperatedly.
Rowan sighed patiently and closed her book. “I meant to tell you earlier, but it didn’t come up. We used to have a theory about Merula.”
“We?” asked Madison.
“Penny, Tonks, Tulip and me” added Rowan. “We rather thought she had a crush on you.”
“What?” snorted Madison “Why did you ever think that? All she did was pick on me at every chance she got.”
“Well that’s exactly why we thought that. She always paid attention to you and was really curious about everything you did. It really seemed to us that she fancied you…in a Merula sort of way.”
“She only did those things because my brother beat her to the vaults and she was pissed” said Madison.
“Maybe. We didn’t know that back then” shrugged Rowan.
“And? What has that got to do with Penny and me now?” asked Madison bewildered.
“Oh Madison, can’t you see – she was jealous” said Rowan impatiently.
“What? Why? Nothing’s going on with Merula and me” blurted Madison.
“Shush! You’ll wake Tulip. I know nothing’s going on, but you have to try and see it from Pennys point of view.”
“What do you mean?” asked Madison.
“Well…you can be…withdrawn. I mean that…sharing is not really your strong suite. You have a tendency to shut people out. I don’t mean to criticize, I’m just explaining” she added hastily seeing the expression on Madisons face. “And it can be hard for people around you. So it must have been really upsetting for Penny to hear that you found an

instant connection with Merula and had no trouble talking with her. Add to that our theory that she fancies you and...there you go – the perfect storm."
Madison sat brooding, thinking about Rowans explanation.
"Hey?" prodded Rowan gently "You ok?"
"No" answered Madison plainly "I'm an idiot."
"You're not. You can talk to her tomorrow and you'll make up."
Madison got up sullenly and pulled her hoodie over her head. She remained stock-still for a second with her hands still in her sleeves and gave an almighty sigh.
"I just wish that I could do something right sometimes."

Madison opened her eyes. The room was cloaked in a dark blue light. She could hear Rowan and Tulip breathing slowly and got up cautiously, trying not to make any noise. The night was giving way to a new morning, large snowflakes were falling silently behind the window. She didn't know why she had woken so suddenly and so early, but was pleased. This meant, that she might actually have time to go flying before classes. She desperately needed to be alone and clear her head. She gathered her things and left the room discreetly. Pulling on her hat and gloves as she was walking, she hastened outside to the grounds. The weather was calm and warmer than it had been for a long time. Madison took a big breath and felt her lungs fill with crisp winter air. Mounting her broom and kicking off, she smiled – the feeling of wind against her face, mixed with snowflakes was exactly what she had been craving. Flying high in the air above the frozen lake, she felt completely alone and at peace. This was a much more gratifying feeling than the release of adrenaline from duelling. The sereneness of her surroundings sank over her, leaving her feeling tranquil and removed from the million things that had been running around in her mind just a few minutes ago. It felt like she was leaving everything behind her as she flew higher and further than she had in a long time. She didn't feel the cold, only a sense of freedom washing over her as she sped up even more. Her eyelashes were covered with tiny white snowflakes as was her dark hair that stuck out from under her hat. The snow was coming down more thickly now and Madison couldn't see very far ahead. That didn't bother her, she was so high up in the air, that there was no chance she would collide with anything or anyone. She laughed out loud with the feeling of release and did a barrel roll in the air.
She was still beaming when suddenly her head started to feel heavy. Her heart sank and the smile died on her face. *"Oh no, not now"* she thought. The heaviness in her head grew fast and she wasted no time — turning her broom, she nosedived towards the ground. She

recognized the feeling, it was the same she had felt with Penny in Hufflepuffs dormitory. White mist was rising around her eyes now. Panicking she shook her head and sped up. The ground was approaching fast, she had to land before Jacob took over or she would surely crash. She had just reached the trees near the edge of the lake when the mist overcame her and she felt her legs go slack. A stab of pain shot through her brain. *"Madison. I need you. Don't abandon me! Just open it!"* her brothers voice encompassed her mind. Silence followed his voice and the pain was gone just as quickly as it had appeared. Madison felt intense cold and opened her eyes. She was lying on the ground, at the edge of the lake. Her broomstick had fallen a few feet from her in a pile of snow with her hat next to it. She was on her back, with her legs in the lake. The ice had evidently broken under her weight and her legs were soaked through with frigid water starting from her knees. Apparently she had managed to descend low enough, because she didn't feel anything seriously hurting or broken. Only her head was throbbing with the ghost of Jacob still lingering. She pulled herself into a sitting position. The silhouette of the castle was barely visible through the snow. She had landed on the other side of the lake. Groping around in her pocket looking for her wand, she remembered, that she had left it on her nightstand. She stared at her dripping feet, the fabric of her pants already starting to ice over. "Fuck!" she said out loud. All the serenity and peace she had felt in the air was gone. In an instant her nerves were raw again and she felt so on the edge, she thought she might burst with anger. How dare he! The one moment she had been free from his constant presence in her life, he forced himself into it again. He couldn't even let her have this. Her whole life had revolved around her brother and he made it impossible for Madison to let him go. Her parents, the league, the vaults, everything was about Jacob, the chosen one.

For years Madison had been living with a constant sense of guilt and shortcoming. She had tried to help, she really had. Finding her brother had been her *reason d'être* for years. She had lived and breathed for the vaults, spending all of her time searching for them, following clues, solving mysteries. And the only thing she accomplished was endangering her friends and getting into trouble. Then she had stopped and listened to Dumbledore. She had ignored the driving guilt and pressure from her parents and her own conscience. And Beatrice had almost gotten killed in the portrait vault nevertheless. Now, when she finally thought she was done with Jacob, he kept dragging her back, hanging unto her, breaking her.

How could she explain all of this to Penny when she was desperately trying to keep her as removed from Jacob as possible. She had been trying to hold on to her and shelter their relationship, she was still

overcome with wonder at how she had been so lucky as to be with Penny at all. The very last thing she wanted, was to admit the burden of Jacob and their parents into her relationship with Penny. But her efforts were in vain, Jacob invaded her himself and Penny was angry with her anyway. No matter what Madison did, she couldn't keep herself intact, she felt like a bludger, flying around aimlessly causing harm, occasionally being beaten to a new direction.

Madison didn't know how much time had passed since she had crashed to the lakeside. She rubbed her face with her gloved hand to remove the remnants of the few tears that had fallen and got up. Her pants were frozen solid around her calves. “Shit” she muttered and toddled to her broom. She had chills running down her spine and all she could think about was the hot bath she was planning to take when she got back to the school. She flew near the ground this time, aware now what could happen if Jacob decided to speak to her again while she was in the air.

When she approached the castle, she glanced at the clock tower before descending. Breakfast was about to start. She sighed in relief and glided downwards. Sneaking past the great hall where clanging of dishes and talking mixed with laughter could be heard, she took the shortest path she knew towards the prefects bathroom. Her teeth were chattering and she could barely feel her toes when she shut the door behind her.

Madison surveyed herself from the mirror while undressing and waiting for the bathtub to fill. Her fall had left some marks after all. There were some little bruises on her back and elbows and a small abrasion near her hip. She sighed and considered herself. She was tall, about 5.7ft, a bit lanky but, thanks to her training, well defined. Her hair was dark brown, bordering on black, curly, thick and perpetually disheveled. She had dark brown eyes, a straight-edged nose and thin lips. Contemplating her reflection, she realized how much like her brother she looked. Shaking her head grimly, she turned away from the mirror and with a low grunt lowered herself into the tub.

The hot water felt like heaven after being half-frozen and covered in snow. She felt drained and sleepy. Missing breakfast was surely worth this bliss. She tried to gather her thoughts while playing slowly with the foam around her. How to talk to Penny was her main concern. She tried to envision how she herself would feel if Penny would keep a part of herself hidden from her. With a pang of guilt, she realized how hurt and confused that would make her. But how could she make her understand, that she was only trying to keep the constant flow of uncertainty and trepidation from tainting her. Suddenly comprehension loomed over Madison — Penny had been right, she was keeping her at a distance. Swallowing hard, she made an effort to

not to cry again. Tightening her jaw and blinking furiously she succeeded barely. She pulled the drain and climbed out of the bath, determined to find Penny and try to make this right before it was too late.

Despite the hot bath, Madison felt cold in her bones throughout the day. She wasn't sure if it was because of her morning outing or because a feeling of dread had settled in her stomach. She couldn't find Penny anywhere, they didn't have any joint classes and she wasn't in her common room during the brake when she ran there to check. She looked over the sea of students gathered for lunch, but didn't spot the familiar blonde anywhere. Skipping lunch, she searched the astronomy tower, the owlery, the potions class room and the library with no luck. Feeling panicky and lightheaded from hunger, she kept checking the time during charms class. She was shaking slightly and felt her muscles ache. What if Penny was avoiding her on purpose, maybe she didn't want to talk to her. Rowan looked up from her textbook and gaped at her. "You look ill Madison. Are you feeling alright?"

"I can't find Penny anywhere" whispered Madison back to her.

"But you look sweaty and pale, do you have a fever or something?"

"Don't know, maybe. I was really cold this morning after the lake. I'll see Madam Pomfrey later, but I have to find Penny first" answered Madison, pulling her hands inside her sweatshirt for warmth.

"What do you mean after the lake? You went to the lake in the morning?" asked Rowan.

"Yeah, went flying, long story" whispered Madison, shivering. Rowan looked at her dubiously, but didn't push her further. When the class ended, Madison sprinted to the great hall to catch Penny before dinner. This time she got lucky – Penny arrived to the hall at the same time she did.

"Madison! Where have you been? I've been looking all over for you" she exclaimed coming up to her.

"What do you mean? I've been looking for you" answered Madison puzzled.

"You weren't at lunch"—"You weren't either, I checked"—"Nor in your common room"—"I was looking for you in your common room"—"And the library, the owlery, the third floor."

Madison shook her head looking down "This castle is too big."

"Well, now that we finally found each other – can we talk?" said Penny anxiously.

"Yes! Can we go to my room? Or your room if you prefer" said Madison eagerly.

"Let's go to my room, it's closer" said Penny looking at Madison closely. "Are you ok? You're shaking."

“I might have a cold, never mind that now” said Madison dismissively. They descended to Hufflepuffs quarters in silence, both of them glancing at each other furtively. Madisons head was buzzing and she felt weak. She supposed Rowan was right and she had a fever, but Madam Pomfrey could heal that in a second and she couldn’t postpone her talk with Penny.
Pennys room was empty and they sat down on her bed, facing each other. Madison sighed, she had been so focused on finding Penny, that she had no idea what to say to her now that she was sitting before her.
“I’m sorry!” they said in unison. Madison smiled “Can I go first?” she asked gently. Penny nodded mutely, looking afraid.
“Look, I’ve been thinking – and you were right” Penny looked at her lap, her shoulders sagging “I have been isolating you. But I didn’t mean to, I really didn’t” said Madison a little desperately “I didn’t realize before that I was doing that. But…the thing with my brother and my whole family…it’s really hard to deal with. And you…well you’re perfect and I didn’t want to bring that part of my life to you. I don’t want that part of my life anywhere near you as a matter of fact. I know I failed, because Beatrice still got stuck and now Jacob is contacting me again and my parents are in some sort of a secret league doing Merlin knows what and I’m part of that whether I want to or not. But you…I was trying to keep you separate from all of that. And I’m sorry, I didn’t realize how it must have felt for you. I’m really-really sorry!” Madison looked at Penny. Her blue eyes were wide and watery and she was fidgeting with the hem of her robe, but she did not look at her. Madisons throat tightened. “Oh, and about Merula” she blustered on “Rowan told me about your theory and I swear, there’s nothing going on. We don’t like each other that way. We were just getting along for a change, she was being friendly, well sort of, you know how she is, and we were just talking about the league and our parents and-and…” Madisons voice faded. Penny looked up and said in a quiet voice “My turn?” Madison nodded apprehensively.
“I’m sorry too. I acted like an idiot in the library. The thing I said about your family? It’s been ringing in my ears ever since. I didn’t mean it, it just came out because I was angry. I was envious at Merula for being able to share something with you that I couldn’t. I want to be that person for you…so I…well I acted like a jealous jerk. I should have just told you what was bothering me, not run away like I did. I’m sorry.”
They stared at each other in silence. “So are we ok?” asked Madison in a shaky voice “Do you forgive me?”
“Do you forgive me?” asked Penny in return. Madison tilted her head and smiled “Absolutely” she said earnestly. Penny smiled and let out a

small sob. Madison pulled her into a tight hug. Relief was filling her and she held Penny like she never planned to let her go. A chill went through her and she shivered slightly. Penny pulled away and pushed Madison in front of her looking at her closely. She touched her face with her hand and jumped in surprise “Madison! You’re burning up!”
“Yeah, I think I have a fever” said Madison. Penny stood up and went to her trunk in the corner. Kneeling beside it, she rummaged through it and emerged holding a small vial. “Here – drink this” she ordered her in a strict voice.
“What is it?” asked Madison taking the vial.
“It’s a mixture of pepper-up potion with shrivelfig, it will bring your fever down.” Madison drained the vial in one gulp. It tasted minty and emanated warmth when going down Madisons throat. “Thanks!” she said getting up. Her limbs were going slack and her eyes were drooping. “I have to get back to my room I think” she said perplexed, wavering on the spot.
“Nope. You’re staying here tonight. The potion will make you fall asleep in about five minutes, you won’t make it back to your room” said Penny pulling back the blankets on her bed.
“So you drugged me?” asked Madison smiling “I could have drunk the potion when I reached my room.”
“You have a really high fever, it was urgent you drink that potion immediately” said Penny smirking to herself while fluffing her pillows. She approached Madison, leading her back to the bed “And I do want you to stay” she said tenderly. Madison smiled and started to pull her clothes off of her. Her arms felt like they weighed a ton and her movements were slow and sluggish.
“Here, let me help you” said Penny and pulled her sweatshirt over her head. Madison fumbled with her belt a bit but managed to get it loose. It was getting harder and harder to stay upright, all she wanted to do was to drown herself into Pennys bed. She pulled her pants off and stood in her t-shirt and boyshorts swaying slightly, blinking her eyes to stay awake. Madison tried to climb into the bed, but sat on the blanket instead.
“Come on, get in. You’ll be asleep any moment now” Penny came to her side and helped her lay down. She pulled off her own clothes quickly and climbed next to her, pulling Madisons back into herself and spooned her from behind. “You should still stay warm until the potion works” she said pulling the blanket over them both. She stopped half-way and touched Madisons elbow gingerly. “You have bruises?” she stated.
“Fell into the lake...almost. Jacobs fault. Froze my ass off” murmured Madison, trying to explain.
“Hush now, tell me in the morning” said Penny in a soothing voice

and pulled the blanket over them. The last thing Madison felt was Penny kissing her shoulder affectionately and pulling her closer.

Chapter 26

Madison woke with her arms above her head, spread-eagled across Pennys bed. She was alone in the room. She blinked and looked around to figure out what time it was and how long had she slept. She found no clock in the room, but judging by the light coming from the window, it was late in the afternoon. She sat up alarmed, she didn't want to get another detention for missing classes. Wondering why Penny didn't wake her, she got up and looked around for her clothes. They were not where she had placed them the previous evening, but, neatly stacked and folded, on a chair next to the door. Madison had just reached them, when the door opened and Penny walked in, carrying a plate full of pastries.
“You're up! Finally. How'd you sleep?” she asked cheerfully, placing the plate on her dresser.
“What time is it? Did I sleep through potions?” croaked Madison jumping on one foot, trying to pull her pants up.
“Madison stop. It's Saturday, remember?” said Penny smiling.
Madison froze “Really?”
“Yes! You can relax, you haven't missed anything” said Penny “How are you feeling? The fever's gone I assume?”
“Yes, I feel fine, great even. I haven't slept like this for a long time. What time is it?” asked Madison stretching herself. Penny didn’t answer her at once. Madison stopped mid-stretch and looked at her. She was watching her with a strange look and biting her lip. It suddenly occurred to Madison, that she had never had so few clothes on in Pennys presence. She was still wearing only her t-shirt and boyshorts. “Penny?”
“It’s almost noon. You slept for over sixteen hours, but I didn’t want to wake you, you looked like you needed it” said Penny blushing and tearing her eyes away from Madison quickly, straightening the bed.
“I guess I did. Thank you. What about you? Did you sleep ok?” asked Madison looking at her.
“Yes, I always sleep great with you” said Penny shyly. “I brought breakfast, or well, lunch now I guess. And Rowan brought your toothbrush and a change of clothes.”
“Rowan was here?” asked Madison raising her eyebrows.
“Yeah, she stopped by to see if you were ok. Tonks told her you slept here. You were really sick, she said you went to the lake yesterday morning?” asked Penny.
“Yeah. I went flying to clear my head and then Jacob talked to me again when I was in the air. That’s why I fell. Let me freshen up, I’ll tell you all about it when we eat, I’m starving, I missed all three meals

yesterday" explained Madison.
Penny tutted disapprovingly and handed Madison her things. When she returned, they ate the pastries Penny had brought while sitting on the bed. Madison told Penny what Jacob had said and how she had fallen into the lake.
"What will you do now? I mean, with Jacob?" asked Penny seriously.
"That's what irks me so much – there's nothing I can do. I guess I'll go to Dumbledore, maybe he can help. But other than that...I have no idea" said Madison glumly.
"Well, he usually can help. And it would be better, if he had all the details anyway I think" said Penny pensively. Madison looked at Penny, she had a little bit of powdered sugar on her upper lip. She smiled and brushed it away with her thumb affectionately. Her hand lingered at Pennys cheek.
"Thank you Penny. I mean for healing me and letting me stay here and for the food and everything..." said Madison sincerely.
"I didn't really give you much choice about staying here" laughed Penny and leaned her cheek into Madisons hand. Madison tugged her face slightly and leaned in. She pressed her lips gently to Pennys. The kiss was tender and sweet, when it ended Madison placed her forehead to Pennys and looked at her "You make me really happy Penny" she said quietly. Pennys eyes widened a little and she draped her hands around Madisons neck. "You make me really happy too" she answered simply.

Madison spent the whole day with Penny. They went to the library and Madison caught up with her homework. The workload had really piled up on her. She had four different essays to finish, a star chart to fill and several chapters to read about veritaserum for potions class. Penny gushed about the potion and explained eagerly how it takes a month to make and how difficult it is to brew. In the evening they were lounging in the Gryffindor common room, playing chess and chatting with Rowan and Tulip, when Charlie burst in the through the portrait door.
"Madison, thank Merlin you're here!" he panted.
"What's the matter?" asked Madison startled. Charlie was looking very agitated, sweating slightly.
"Chester threw a bloody boomstink at the dungeons and it grabbed Snapes arm and he got detention for two weeks and Ravenclaw is not letting us postpone and Fawn Elmses sister is getting married and we need you to play!" he blurted in one breath.
"What?"
Charlie took a deep breath and started again, speaking more slowly.
"Our chaser Chester got detention from Snape so he can't play during

our next match with Ravenclaw in a week. Our usual back-up Fawn is away for her sisters wedding during the game. So we need someone to play chaser or we forfeit the match. Will you play?"
Madison laughed "I've never played a serious match before Charlie. There's got to be a better option than me."
Charlie shook his head "I've seen you play plenty of times. You're an exceptional flyer, I was going to ask you to join the team next year anyway."
Madison frowned, looking uncertain.
"You should do it, his right, you're excellent on a broom" said Penny encouragingly. Tulip nodded "Go on, it will be fun to experience a real match. You'll be smashing!"
Charlie looked at Madison imploringly "Please Madison! We can't forfeit the match, we'll lose the cup for sure. The team needs you."
Madison laughed "Well I can't very well say no now, can I. Ok, I'll play." Charlie let out a huge sigh of relief and sunk on the couch "Thank you Madison, you have no idea what this means to the team."
"But Charlie, you know I haven't ever played a real match, I don't want to let you down" said Madison concerned.
"Don't worry, we have a week to practice, we'll train every evening, it will be fine" answered Charlie.
"What's a boomstink?" asked Rowan looking puzzled "You said Chester threw a boomstink at Snape?"
Charlie laughed "Well someone had the brilliant idea to attach stink pellets to an ever-bashing-boomerang and voilà." Madison smiled to herself, she had a pretty good idea whose brilliant idea it had been.
"And it hit Snape? Oh poor Chester!" said Tulip snickering.
"Yeah, I'm not sure how Chester only got two weeks, Snape was looking like he was going to force-feed him toad brains."
Madison felt a little nervous at the prospect of playing in the next match. She had played quidditch for her whole life, but never officially and in a match where points actually mattered. She couldn't let the Gryffindor team and Charlie down however. Penny gave her a side along glance and took her hand, casually sqeezing it. "Don't worry, you'll be great!" she whispered while the others were laughing about Snape and Chester. Madison shrugged and smiled at her gratefully.
Charlie had booked the quidditch field for Sunday so that Madison could start practicing playing with the team. It went better than she had expected, the other team-members were helpful and welcoming and she had a blast with them. She scored most of the points while Charlie was looking for the snitch and by the end, he was beaming at her.
"You were on form Madison. It's like you've been a part of the team

from the start. You really have to join for real" said Charlie thumping her back when they landed.
"Thanks, it was fun" said Madison smiling broadly. Madam Hooch approached them "I was watching, you're team is in good shape Weasley, well done."
"Thank you!" beamed Charlie proudly.
"Steward, the headmaster wants a word with you. And he enjoys pear drops" said Madam Hooch to Madison in a swift manner.
"He enjoys...oh, right. Thanks Madam Hooch" said Madison and took off waving at Charlie.

Dumbledore was sitting in his chair when Madison entered. He smiled at her benignly and gestured to the chair opposite from him.
"Thank you for coming Madison. How are you doing?" he asked.
"Fine. I actually have something I wanted to talk to you about as well professor" said Madison sitting down.
"Well then, guests first" said Dumbledore and leaned back in his chair.
"My brother has been speaking to me again. In my mind I mean. It has happened twice now" said Madison.
"And what did he say to you?" asked Dumbledore seriously.
"Well not much. The same things he said before mostly. That I need to find him and that we have a bond and I shouldn't abandon him. Oh and that I should open it. Do you think that the it is the next vault?" asked Madison warily.
"Regrettably, I do not know. How does he speak to you?" asked Dumbledore looking at her.
"What do you mean? In my head, like in the hospital" answered Madison.
"I mean do you remain conscious or does he take over fully?" explained Dumbledore.
"Both I think. One time I just felt a pain in my head and I saw the mist around me again, but I didn't pass out or anything. The other time I did, but only for a moment" answered Madison screwing up her eyes trying to remember the details.
Dumbledore sighed "It was about your brother I wanted to talk to you too. The healers in St. Mungos hospital have written to inform me, that they might have a cure they want try on your brother."
"Really? And it would make him normal again?" asked Madison wide-eyed.
"They don't know for sure yet. The potion they want to try requires special ingredients, that are hard to obtain, it might take some time before they can brew it."
"What kind of ingredients?"
"Well dragons eyes for one thing" said Dumbledore "and not just any

dragons eyes, the particular dragon has to be of a specific species and of given weight and age. It is really rather complicated. But they did write to me, that there is hope at least. I assume this gives you comfort?" he asked kindly.
Madison sat quietly, pondering her shoes. "It sort of depends on how he will be when he comes back" she mumbled "I hope he will just forget about the vaults then" she added.
"Indeed" agreed Dumbledore "unfortunately it is often our fate to watch helplessly by as our loved ones make the wrong choices in life" he added smiling sadly. "There was one other thing I wanted to discuss with you" he said straightening himself. "The League of Seven is indeed active again, or better yet – still. It seems, that its members have shown interest in your brother. They have made inquiries and attempted visits to St. Mungo's."
Madison fidgeted in her chair "You mean my parents?" she asked blushing.
"You are sure then, that they are members of this order?" asked Dumbledore, looking at her over his spectacles.
"Pretty sure yeah. I haven't asked them or anything, but..." said Madison feeling very uncomfortable.
"Well it is not known how many members there are active at this time, but others beside your parents have tried to contact Jacob. You are aware by now, I'm sure, that there is a legend involved with the vaults and the one who can enter them. The members of the League seem to think that your brother is the one the legend refers to."
Madison nodded looking at her shoes. "I know, I found a book in the library."
"I wish I could offer you better advice than I have previously, but it seems, that we are in a standstill once again. The League of Seven, while secretive and sinister, is not forbidden by our regulations to operate, not unless they brake any laws at least. We have to rely on the healers of St. Mungo's to find a cure for your brother, until then, there is little we can do" concluded Dumbledore with a heavy sigh.
"Ok then. Thank you professor!" said Madison getting up from her chair, looking crestfallen.
"Madison? Before you go, remember that blood ties are just that – they are binds, that fetter us to people from birth. They do not rule over ones life if we ourselves won't give them the power to do so. There are bonds we form with others of our own choosing that might grow to be much more significant." Madison looked at him uncertainly, not sure she was understanding what he meant by that.
"Also – I hear you are playing in the next quidditch match. Good luck!" Dumbledore smiled at her kindly.

Chapter 27

Flying until she couldn't see the quaffle anymore because it was so dark, became the new routine for Madison during the week preceding the big match. Charlie was relentless and ushered the team to the field every moment it was free. Madison was starting to enjoy playing in a team a lot more than she had expected. Being a part of a group, that worked together and performed difficult moves like a well oiled machine was thrilling. She thoroughly enjoyed her week with the Gryffindor team, her only struggle was with the amount of time her practicing was taking up. She had to stay up late every night to keep step with her homework. She saw Penny mostly during meals, but they did meet between classes as often as they could. Madison started to get used to leaving empty classrooms with Penny in a very disheveled state, with her lips numb from kissing and her eyes glazed with lust, running late for her next lesson.

The morning before the match an owl dropped a letter in her lap during breakfast. She opened it with trepidation, assuming it was from Dumbledore with news of her brother. The letter was very short, written in an elegant cursive that Madison recognized immediately.

"Dear Madison, It appears, that I will be near Hogwarts today. I would like to see you. If you are available, I will be at the Three Broomsticks during early evening hours. I apologize for the late notice, but I do hope to see you there. Silver"

Madison stared at the letter dumbfounded. Her father was coming here, and he wanted to see her? This was the first time that his father had asked to meet her anywhere. Madison read the letter again carefully. He had even written that he hoped to see her. This must have something to do with her brother, or with the league. Then again, he hadn't mentioned her mother joining them, if this had something to do with Jacob, surely Cassia would come too.

"Morning!" a lively looking Penny sat down next to her and gave her a quick peck.

"What's the matter with you? You look like you've seen a ghost?" she asked tilting her head and looking at Madison.

"Got a letter from my father" she said and passed the note to Penny to read. She scanned the parchment quickly and asked frowning "Does he always end his letters with his name?"

"Err..I think so. Why?" asked Madison surprised that this was the thing Penny was focusing on.

"No reason. It's just...unexpected" she shook her head slightly and turned to Madison "What do you think he wants?"

"Something to do with my brother probably, but who knows. I've

never met him like this before" shrugged Madison.
"So you're going then?" asked Penny.
"I think I better. It's really odd though" said Madison pensively.
"Well try not to miss dinner, you need to preserve your strength for tomorrow."
"Yes dear" chuckled Madison as Penny nudged her playfully. "What about your parents? How do they end their letters to you?" asked Madison.
"Well, mostly with love mom and dad, you know something like that" answered Penny looking a little embarrassed. "But everyone is different" she added quickly, eyeing Madison.
"They seem very caring, they write to you and Beatrice so often" reflected Madison.
"Yeah, we've always been very close. My mom and I both love potions, we usually mess up the entire kitchen when I'm at home testing something new. And my dad is...well he's just the greatest."
"That's nice" smiled Madison. Penny looked at her sideways and took her hand, kissing her knuckles quickly. Madison smiled again widely
"What are you doing before noon by the way?" she asked "I have to go to practice then, but I actually have a few hours to kill before, if you can believe it."
"I have a potion brewing in Snapes laboratory that I was going to check on. I have to add granian hair to it or it might diffuse" said Penny a little disappointed "Want to come along?" she asked smiling hopefully.
"Sure" said Madison "I love watching you whirl around in there, you look like a mad scientist. A really cute mad scientist" she added quickly. Penny laughed "Well come on then Igor."
"Hey!" exclaimed Madison "I can understand your muggle-references you know."
"A really cute Igor?" added Penny innocently with laughter in her eyes. Madison felt herself melt and followed Penny, her heart singing.

Madison showered quickly and dressed with a little more care before going down to Hogsmeade. Her palms were sweating and her stomach was in a tight knot. She supposed, that this was not usual when someone went to meet their father, but then again, this was a first for her and Silver.
Entering the Three Broomsticks, she spotted her father at once. It was easy as he stood out from the usual laid-back crowd that occupied the place. Silver was sitting in a corner table looking very rigid, with his arms crossed over his chest, peering around with an imperious expression. A small gillywater stood before him, untouched. When his eyes landed on Madison, he nodded and gestured her over. While

Madison was making her way to the table, Silver ordered a butterbeer from Madam Rosmerta.
“Hi” said Madison quietly, sitting down on the edge of the chair in front of her father.
“Hello Madison. Thank you for coming” said her father looking at her. “I hope our meeting is not very inconvenient for you. I imagine you have schoolwork to do?”
“I can manage, it’s ok” said Madison. Madam Rosmerta placed a butterbeer in front of Madison “There you go dear” she said kindly. Madison smiled at her. Silver was watching them “You come here often?” he asked.
“Sometimes yeah. It’s the best pub in Hogsmeade” answered Madison a little perplexed at her fathers interest.
“I see. Do you come here with your girlfriend?”
Madison was completely taken aback by this question. It was remarkable, that her mother had mentioned that bit of information to him, but even more startling, that he actually asked Madison about her.
“Yes, we come here sometimes when we have free time” she answered slowly. Silver nodded and didn’t say anything else. Instead he sipped his gillywater and looked around wrinkling his nose. Madison was just about to burst out the question that was burning in her throat about why they were there, when Silver coughed and turned briskly towards her.
“As you can imagine, I have something to discuss with you” Madison nodded apprehensively “I’ve come about your brother. I think you know what I need to ask you?”
Madison looked at his father with wide eyes “No, no idea” she said shaking her head.
“I know your brother has spoken to you. He has spoken with me too. I know what he has asked you to do.” Silver was beginning to speak more urgently, leaning toward Madison. “I know what he needs to get well.”
“You mean the last vault?” asked Madison dubiously. His father nodded, looking relieved that Madison had understood him.
“I have come here tonight to ask you to fulfill his request” he said solemnly. Madison could not believe her ears. This was beyond mad, even for her family.
“Fulfill his request? You mean the request that I bring him to the vault? You can’t be serious. He’s not in his right mind, he’s not making sense. The portrait vault drove him bonkers.”
“Don’t talk about your brother like that” said Silver heatedly “If anyone knows anything about the vaults, it’s Jacob. He has communicated to me, that he needs you to open the last vault with

him for him to regain his...usual composure. You can not sincerely think, that you would know more about the matter than him?"
"I know, that the last vault he opened almost got me and Beatrice killed. I know, that they are incredibly dangerous. Not to mention that the location of the last vault is unknown and Jacob is supposedly the only one who can open it and well...for some reason I don't see him skipping into Hogwarts to do it, can you?" asked Madison mockingly.
"Silence" snapped his father with anger evident in his voice. He took a deep breath and said in a would-be-calm voice "These are not insurmountable obstacles. Jacob knows the location of the last vault. He could lead you-"
"Are you not listening to me?" yelled Madison "I'm not doing it! I won't help him with something, that could bring danger to the school or my friends."
Silver leaned back in his chair and looked at Madison with disdain "So you willingly abandon your brother in his time of need? You turn your back on your family? Is this what I am to understand?" he asked coolly.
Madison laughed bitterly "Turn my back on the family? You can't be serious. Are you forgetting that Jacob wanted to kill a little girl just months ago? And then he tried to kill me. Am I supposed to just forget about that?"
"You know the vaults had an effect on him, he was stuck there for so long. If you had done what he asked, we wouldn't be in this situation now. It was your poor judgment that made him like this and now you refuse to help him. Don't you understand what is at stake? Not only your brothers health but the entire standing of our family."
Madisons stomach grew cold, her hands gripping her butterbeer shook "I've given you my answer. I will not try to find the next vault. I do hope, that Jacob regains his mind with the help of the healers in St. Mungo's but I can not help him."
"I see. Then it would seem that we have nothing else to discuss. Thank you again for coming" said Silver in an icy voice and stood up. "I thought that your brother meant more to you Madison" he said looking down on her before walking slowly outside.

Madison stumped slowly to the great hall, deep in thought. His fathers words were ringing in her ears sounding louder and louder. She felt queasy with the sense of his words sinking into her. She had never felt more ashamed to be a part of the Steward family than she did at that moment. Someone else's voice echoed through her muddled brain and she looked around. Penny was standing at her side looking at her with a puzzled expression. "Madison?"
"Huh? What?"

“You were so far away. I asked what happened. How did it go with your father?”
“Not great” sighed Madison.
“You don't want to talk about it?” asked Penny fearfully, looking defeated. Madison raised her eyes to Pennys “No, actually I do. Fancy a walk after dinner?” Penny nodded seriously, her eyes gleaming.

They strolled around the castle grounds, shuffling their feet against the snow. The air was crisp and the fields of white glittered around them under the moonlight. Frost was settling in, but the night was silent and windless. Madison repeated the conversation she had had with her father in the Three Broomsticks and Penny listened in silence, letting her finish her story.
“He just sat there and blamed me for Jacob. He didn't care, that he went mad in the vault, that he tried to kill Beatrice and me. He talked about him, like he was this great hope of the Steward family and I was this moron who kept getting in his way. And I couldn't make him understand, he just insisted that I find the bloody vault.” Madisons voice got louder as she talked, her resentment growing with each word. Penny didn't say anything, but she took hold of her hand and squeezed it gently. Madison looked away from Penny, towards the icy lake sparkling in the dim light. “I can't do it” she said quietly “I won't do it, it's too dangerous. We don't know what will happen if the vault opens.”
“Yes, you're right. But it's ok to want to help him” said Penny delicately, trying to catch her eyes. Madison didn't turn to her, she kept starting far ahead, avoiding her gaze, but her hand in Pennys jerked at her words. She was silent for a long time as they walked on. Finally she said in almost a whisper “I did let him down, my father's right. I turned against him the moment I understood what he had become in the portrait vault. I don't regret that, but I still feel...I feel so guilty Penny. And then I feel guilty that a part of me wants to help him, so he could get better and then maybe he would be Jacob again. Like he used to be when I was younger.” They stopped walking and stood in the darkness, little flakes of snow were starting to come down, falling gently with no wind to stir them in their path.
“He was so sure I would help him, it didn't even occur to him, that I would say no. And he is still sure now when he talks to me from St. Mungo's. He still believes that I will choose him, help him. So did my father. It's so hard to keep saying no, to keep ignoring them. I already left him in the portrait, but now I feel like I'm leaving him all over again every moment I do nothing. It frightens me that they believed me to be so easily affected. They don't know me at all...and I don't know them either.” Madison felt a lump in her throat, she swallowed

hard and looked at the lake again. “I just keep failing all the time” she finally admitted quietly to Penny, feeling a tear running down her cheek, despite her efforts.
Penny sighed and brushed her tear away with her gloved hand “You're not failing. You're so strong without even realizing. It must have been awful in the portrait, I can't even imagine how you managed it. And it's perfectly normal that you still want to help him, you shouldn't feel guilty about that.” She pulled Madison into a hug, holding her as close as their many layers of clothing allowed. Madison felt a few more tears escaping her and pulled away from Penny, brushing them away hastily with the back of her hand. “Thanks” she muttered feeling slightly embarrassed suddenly “Shall we start back? My toes are freezing.” Penny looked at her compassionately and turned silently back towards the castle.
They trudged in, leaving little pools of melted snow after them, and stopped in front of the great hall.
“Do you think it would be ok if I stayed with you today?” asked Madison tentatively “or if you preferred, we could go to my dormitory. It's ok if you can't, I just thought I’d ask” she added hurriedly. Penny rolled her eyes smiling mid Madisons sentence and turned, pulling her by her hand behind her, leading them to the dungeons entrance “Come on doofus.”

“Your toes are like icicles” shuttered Penny yanking her blanket up to her chin. Madison pulled her nearer, pressing her chest into Pennys back with her arms around her. Tonks was snoring loudly on the other side of the room and Chiara was breathing steadily in the bed next to them. “Thank you for tonight Penny” said Madison into Pennys ear “for listening” she added. Penny turned to her and kissed her gingerly. She pulled away and stared into Madisons eyes for a second with a searching look, but promptly leaned back in for another kiss. She was warm and soft, smelling faintly like lilacs during spring time. She took Madisons face between her hands and kissed her again with passion. Madison didn't object, but leaned back and pulled Penny on top of herself. She was wearing her lightblue two-piece again, with fabric so thin, that Madison could trace every curve of the lithe body moving on top of her own. Pennys kisses turned increasingly more fervent and she straddled Madisons thigh, pushing her own leg between Madisons. Separated only by two layers of thin clothing, as Madison was in her shorts, she felt the heat emanating from Penny and unconsciously spread her legs a little to accommodate her better. Madison felt a sense of urgency from Penny, that she had not seen before, she was kissing her almost forcefully and her hands worked around Madisons body possessively, their breaths mingled and hearts beating against

each other. Madisons head was whirling, she tried to slow down their movements, but her own body betrayed her as her hips pressed against Pennys thigh and started to move slowly against her. Penny bit her neck and let out a low moan as a response, pushing herself even closer and moving in the same rhythm as Madison. Her camisole had ridden upwards, exposing her stomach, Madison traced her hand along Pennys back to her side and ended up between them on Pennys abdomen. She inched slowly upwards until her finger met the hem of her shirt. Her throat tightened and she tried to meet Pennys eyes, silently asking for permission. She stopped kissing her for a second and then slid her own hand under Madisons tank-top smirking slightly. Madisons hips bucked when she felt Pennys hand on her breast and she quickly pushed her own hand under Pennys shirt. Her skin was so smooth, it made Madison lightheaded. She caressed her breast and ran her fingers over Pennys nipple while kissing her neck vehemently. Penny arched and panted, her hips moving faster by the second. Suddenly Tonks grunted and shifted in her bed, mumbling something incoherently through her sleep before continuing snoring loudly. Madison and Penny had both stopped, frozen mid-movements, they looked at each other, breathing heavily. Sense of their surroundings and what they were doing loomed over Madison. She remembered Pennys reasons for stopping them before in a similar situation and her mind cleared a little from its lust-filled haze.
“We shouldn't” she whispered.
“I know” answered Penny grudgingly “I didn't mean to get so...it just happens when you're so close, I can't help it” she explained with an abashed smile.
“I know, me too. But we can't. Not here and now. Besides – I want you to be really ready, so you won't regret it when we finally do” said Madison, her breathing growing calmer.
“I won't regret it. But thank you” said Penny letting out a huge sigh and kissing Madison tenderly. She pulled her shirt down and slid her body off of Madisons, though not completely. Snuggling into her shoulder she whispered “I've never been so...zealous before. It's a bit sudden.”
“Sudden...bad?” asked Madison holding her breath.
“No! Not bad, just unexpected. I've never lost my senses so completely than I do with you” said Penny stroking Madisons arm with her fingers. “It's like, my brain shuts down and my body takes over.”
“I know what you mean” smiled Madison.
“I love it actually. Even though it's getting to be a bit frustrating” said Penny restlessly.
“Don't worry, we have all the time in the world” answered Madison pulling her closer.

Chapter 28

Madison woke feeling anxious. It took her some time to figure out why she was so nervous and on the edge already so early. When Tonks asked her if she felt ready for the big match, her brain flooded with dread. Between her fathers visit and her night with Penny, she had almost forgotten about the quidditch game with Ravenclaw. She went to the great hall for breakfast although she felt like she couldn't eat one bite. Charlie came running to her when she sat down "How did you sleep? Are you feeling rested? Eat something, a full stomach goes a long way during a heated match" he blurted out as soon as he had flopped down next to her.
"Fine. Yes. I will" nodded Madison feeling her anxiety swelling.
"Don't worry, everything will be fine. You have nothing to fret about" encouraged Charlie when he saw Madisons expression. "I'll see you on the field" he bumped her shoulder getting up and moved on to the rest of the team huddled together at the end of the table.
Penny observed her sympathetically "Here, have some toast at least" she passed a slice towards Madison. "He's right, you're ready. Don't doubt yourself." Madison could only nod and chew the dry toast that felt like sawdust in her mouth. She said bye to Penny and went to the changing rooms soon after. The team gathered in silence and put on their quidditch robes. Charlie paced around them, already wearing his uniform. "Good luck all" he said in a cracking voice when the time came to enter the pitch. The Ravenclaw team was already in the field. Skye waved at Madison and shouted "Going to watch out for you especially Steward!" Madison waved back at her and smiled in spite of her nerves.
At Madam Hooches whistle they mounted their brooms and kicked off. Madison felt calmer immediately. Flying had been a way to relax for her for years and her mind switched to a composed sereneness almost as soon as she had risen from the ground. Looking around, she remembered her training and flew to her position as chaser. When Madam Hooch released the quaffle, Madisons focus became so strong, that her surroundings blurred out from the edges of her vision. She had eyes only for the balls in the air and the players moving between them. Almost forgetting the importance of the match, she felt like she had during the last week at practices. Performing well formed maneuvers with her teammates, she scored several times and helped block Ravenclaws other chaser from passing the quaffle to Skye on one occasion. Surging around the field, she kept the quaffle in view at all times, looping and rolling to avoid the bludgers. Ravenclaws beaters were relentless in their struggles to interfere with the

gryffindors attempts to score. The bludger missed Madison by a hair several times when she had been too eager to get to the quaffle. She nosedived to get rid of it chasing her and pulled her broom upwards while coming to almost a complete halt. The black ball swished under her and she let her broom fall freely a few feet to get her speed back. Sprinting upwards from her dive she flew under Skye and intercepted the quaffle when she tried to pass it to her teammate. Zigzagging to the goal hoops, she let go of her broomstick and threw the red ball with all her might. It flew through the middle hoop and she heard the scoreboard clink, adjusting the points. Suddenly she felt a hard thump at the back of her head and her body dropped forward. She didn't manage to grab her broom with her hands, but her legs clamped around its handle as she plummeted towards the ground. Flattening herself against the broom, she recovered quickly and clutched her handle again. It was too late to rise from the dive she had plunged into, so she guided her broom to turn into a fast glide near the ground. It was a close call, Madison felt the grass blades on the field swish under her elbows before she could push up again. Soaring to the level of the goal hoops, she rubbed the back of her head, feeling a huge bump starting to form at her nape. She was scouting the field to get back at the quaffles tail when she heard Madam Hooches whistle. Looking wildly around, she saw Charlie descending from her left with a huge grin and his hand raised to the air. Inspecting the scoreboard quickly, she sighed in relief. They had won by 210 points which meant that the Gryffindor team had a fair advantage to score the cup. Feeling her body relax, she circled to the ground.

The team gathered and hugged each other, shouting and cheering so loudly, that Madison didn't make out one word. Charlie pulled her close and thumped her back "See! I told you it would be fine. You were brilliant, that dive you did was unbelievable, Ravenclaws beaters were actually staring after you with that one." Madison smiled and looked around the field. Skye passed her and offered her congratulations, though a bit grudgingly.

"My own fault I suppose, shouldn't have encouraged you to join the team" she said shrugging.

"I haven't joined, I was only filling in for Chester" explained Madison.

"Well not to dig my own grave here, but you really have to join Steward" said Skye seriously "With skills like yours, it would be a waste not to. Besides, then we can play against each other again and I'll get a do over."

"Yeah that move when she flew under you and pinched the quaffle was a beauty" grinned Charlie.

"Can't argue with that" agreed Skye "Anyway, enjoy your victory and join the team Steward. So maybe next time I'll be under you" she

winked and left to join her dejected looking teammates. Charlies raised his eyebrows and gave a low whistle. Madison looked at him "What?" Charlie peered at her incredulously, but seeing Madisons confused expression he just shook his head "Never mind. Let's go, I'll bet there's a party happening somewhere."
Leaving the field, Madison felt very tired as tension was ebbing away and her muscles started to loosen up. The team discussed the match animatedly all the way to the changing rooms, replaying the key moments and whooping raucously. Madam Pomfrey was waiting for them when they had changed their clothes. She ushered Madison and Andre, who was Ravenclaws keeper, to the side. Andre had a nose bleed which Madam Pompfrey fixed with her wand directly, muttering about the dangers of quidditch and stunts she'd seen kids pull. Andre smirked at Madison and left when Madam Pomfrey turned to her. She inspected her nape and eyes, pulling a potion from her pouch and handing it to Madison. It tasted like spinach mixed with powdered crayons and Madisons eyes watered trying not to spit it out after swallowing. Madam Pomfrey looked at her so sternly, that she spluttered her a quick thank you and jogged outside hastily.
Rowan, Tulip, Ben and Penny were gathered outside the Gryffindor common room.
"Excellent flying! Well done!" bellowed Tulip at once when she saw Madison.
"You were outstanding, congratulations!" beamed Rowan.
"That dive – it was so scary, I hardly dared look, I was sure you would crash. But you really fly exceptionally well Madison" said Penny "Does your head hurt? That bludger almost knocked you out."
"No, Madam Pomfrey was there, she fixed me and Andre on the spot. I just have to get rid of the aftertaste of that potion she gave me" answered Madison.
"Well perfect, there's a party going on. Let's get you a butterbeer!" offered Ben gesturing towards the Fat Lady.

The after-party lasted all day and well into the night. Gryffindor common room was so full, that people had to sit on the ground and occasionally on each other. Professor McGonagall came to congratulate the team, looking very pleased. She didn't stay long and left after halfheartedly reminding them of curfew times. Madison, Penny, Rowan and Ben were sitting on the couch nearest to the fireplace with Tonks, Bill, Charlie and Tulip sprawled on the floor, surrounded by pillows and butterbeer bottles.
"How come you don't play quidditch Bill?" asked Ben "Doesn't it run in the family?"
"I guess not" shrugged Bill "I never got so much pleasure out of it as

Charlie does. I play for fun sometimes, but I don't really care about the score or the teams or any of that really."
"Well you were brilliant today Charlie! How on earth you can spot that tiny bugger in all that mayhem is beyond me" said Tulip looking at Charlie with pride. He laughed "Extreme focus. That's all it takes. When you have lived with my twin brothers, you learn to keep an eye out for things flying near you."
"I have never enjoyed flying that much. I just feel so insecure on a broomstick. Once I fell off because a butterfly passed me and I didn't want to collide with him" smiled Rowan.
"Me neither. I never got into it when I was younger and I prefer the spectators role anyway. My dad was a bit disappointed though. He's a muggle and when he found out about broomsticks he was really eager to give them a try, but my mother hates them and doesn't use them at all. So he was hoping that I could take him for a ride after our lessons began, but I'm more hopeless on it than he is. I guess it's up to Beatrice" said Penny.
"Well Madison could show your father some moves, she's amazing in the air" provided Tonks. Penny didn't answer her.
"What? You haven't bragged about your girlfriend being a quidditch-pro to your parents?" asked Tonks laughing.
"Not yet" muttered Penny, looking awkward and turning to Ben asked him much more loudly than it was necessary as they were sitting next to each other "What about you? What's your excuse for not playing quidditch?"
Ben looked spooked by the thought alone "Are you crazy? Have you met me? I would fly straight into a wall first thing. Or I would float into the Forbidden Forest, or just float into the space or-"
"Ok-ok, we get the picture Ben" laughed Bill "It's not for everyone, I agree with you on that one."
"But the faces on those beaters after Madison made that dive, priceless" reminded Tulip smiling at the memory. Everyone agreed and started discussing the different moves and stunts seen during the match again. The party lasted until professor McGonagall returned at one o'clock and sent everyone to bed and walked the members of other houses back to their common rooms. Penny blew a kiss at Madison before she was ushered out of the portrait door by McGonagall, who slammed the door shut behind her with a loud bang.

Heavy winds blew outside the castle and care of magical creatures classes were canceled. Snow was falling so thickly, that even Hagrid had trouble moving around the castle grounds and no one showed up to go to Hogsmeade on the next weekend. Spirits among the students were high in spite of the weather. It was too soon to worry about

exams and before that, they had the spring break to look forward to in April.
Madison for once had free time to use as she pleased. She kept track of her homework and went training every other night in the room of requirement, but other than that, her free hours were spent with Penny. They had made out in almost all the classrooms and corridors they knew. Sometimes they just kissed lazily for hours on end in abandoned passageways, other times they flew through the secret pathways escaping Filch while buttoning their shirts and gasping for air. They sneaked food from the kitchens and had little picnics in different places around the castle, played chess and exploding snap, practiced spells they had learned and some they tested on their own.
One of Madisons favorite pastimes was watching Penny brew potions. Her capabilities were unrivaled, she knew instinctively which ingredient would mix with others well and which might cause her cauldron to melt. She was also very eager to experiment. Not knowing the outcome of some of the combinations, made her want to try them even more. Even Snape acknowledged her gift and allowed her access to his laboratory outside of class hours – the highest compliment Snape had ever given to a student as far as they knew. Madison spent hours watching her work silently, only passing her some of the ingredients or helping her mark down her measurements occasionally.
Madison herself checked out all kinds of books from the library and lazed around the common room, reading everything that seemed interesting to her. She read passages out loud to Penny that she thought were funny or interesting and discovered, that history of magic was much more interesting when it wasn't coming from Binns and wasn't constrained to only dates and dry facts.
One evening they were lounging in Hufflepuffs common room. Penny, with her head on Madisons abdomen, was reading the Daily Prophet while Madison was holding a book about giant wars with one hand and stroking Pennys hair absentmindedly with the other when Tonks burst into the room.
"Ok, that's it! You guys might as well take over for Pince with the amount of reading you are doing. Get up, we are having a party!"
"A party? For what?" asked Madison.
"You see! That's what I'm talking about" shouted Tonks pointing her finger at Madison accusingly "What do you mean 'for what'? Because why not! You guys are already like an old married couple. We are young, we are able, we are willing! Besides, it's Friday, Bill bought a case of firewhiskey, neither me nor Tulip are in detention and Rowan said she wanted to dance. Do you need any more reasons? Do you?"
Madison and Penny burst out laughing at Tonks's indignation.
"Alright we're in" said Penny still laughing "Where and when are we

having this party?"
"Everywhere, anytime, the sky is our limit!" roared Tonks and rushed to the door again "I have to go get ready." When the door closed Madison and Penny looked at each other smiling but before they could do anything else however, the door opened again and Tonks poked her head in "Oh, and when I said 'everywhere' I meant the room of requirement and by 'anytime' I meant in two hours." She slammed the door shut again.

When they arrived to the seventh floor, it became obvious, that Tonks had meant business. The corridor was full of talking students coming and going at ease. The doors to the room of requirement were open and when they looked inside, they saw, that it had transformed into a huge hall with candles and torches on the walls and little tables all around, covered with food and goblets. Sofas, armchairs and couches where placed near the walls and gently flowing drapes were creating little nooks of privacy. Music was playing and people were dancing in the middle of it all.
"How on earth are they expecting not to get caught with this amount of noise" wondered Madison.
"I'm glad you asked" answered Charlie who had appeared next to them "It's an old trick the older students have used for years for some leisure time. Five or six best casters secured this area hours ago. They cast muffliato, anti-intruder and stealth sensoring spells all around this floor. In addition, Tonks and Tulip spiked Filches pumpkin juice with sleeping draught so he wouldn't come nosing around and Ben trapped Mrs. Norris in the third floor lavatory."
"Wow, that's impressive" said Madison "But how is the room of requirement staying open?"
"Ah well, there's a trick to that too. You see Bill opened the room by envisioning a place where he could hold a large party with open doors. As long as he stays inside, the room will remain open to everyone."
"So when he leaves, the room closes?" asked Madison.
"Yes, and the people remaining inside will be thrown into the corridor and he would have to ask it to open all over again. We have had a few mishaps with that one, but we learned from our mistakes. Like he never forgets to envision toilets for the room anymore."
Madison laughed out loud "You guys really know how to throw a party!"
"Well go on, check it out, Rowan and Ben are already in there" beamed Charlie and led them inside.
"I'm the worst prefect there ever was" muttered Penny to herself when they entered. "Do you want to leave?" asked Madison quietly from her

“If you don’t want to, we can-”
“No, I want to. I couldn’t stop it anyway. And besides, Tonks was right – we are young and able!” smiled Penny.
“Don’t forget willing” said Tonks walking over to them with a glass of firewhiskey “Cheers!”

Hours later Madison reflected to herself, that she had never had so much fun at a party before. It felt like there was no tomorrow, the dance-floor was always full, people were coming and going, chatting in the corners and laying on the sofas, eating and drinking. Some of the little nooks had turned into make-out stations and she saw Tonks and Adam in each others arms against a wall. Tonks’s hair was changing color while she was kissing him and Madison pondered briefly if that was a good sign or not. Ben kept telling everyone about his courageous act of trapping Mrs. Norris until Rowan dragged him with her to go dancing. Charlie and Tulip were alternating between occupying one of the make-out nooks and dancing so wildly, that people were backing away from them. Bill was in deep conversation with a beautiful girl from Ravenclaw and Barnaby was chatting with Merula and Ismelda. Madison and Penny had talked and laughed so much, that Madison felt her cheeks hurting. When a new song by the Weird Sisters came on, Penny pulled Madison to the dance-floor. It was almost impossible to dance facing each other as there were so many people pressed together. Madison soon discovered, that she couldn’t see Penny anymore, but was surrounded by other students. She tried to move carefully to the side to look for her, when she bumped into Skye.
“Fancy meeting you here” she said while continuing moving “I see you have what it takes on the dance-floor as well Steward.”
“Thanks” smiled Madison “and the same chances of getting knocked out as in the field with this crowd.” Skye laughed and pressed herself closer to Madison “Well go on then, show me your best moves.”
Suddenly Penny appeared at Madisons side. “Sorry to intrude, but I’m going to steal her away now” she said and yanked Madison away from the pile. “Some other time then Steward!” yelled Skye after them and continued dancing.
Penny dragged Madison to the side of the room and asked “Do you want to go outside for a little bit, I need air.”
“Sure” answered Madison gladly. She needed some quiet herself after the cluster in the middle. They walked out of the room and turned to one of the corridors. Some students were chatting quietly, leaning against the walls when they passed them. “Come on” said Penny and tugged her hand. She moved one of the tapestries and a door became visible. They entered into an abandoned classroom and when the door

closed behind them, sounds of the party grew faint. Penny lit one of the torches with her wand and the room shimmered in warm light.
“Much better” sighed Madison and smiled at Penny. She was looking at her shoes frowning slightly. “Are you ok?” asked Madison.
“She fancies you” said Penny looking up at Madison.
“Who?” she asked bewildered.
“Skye of course” answered Penny seriously.
“No she doesn’t” laughed Madison “She’s just friendly.”
“You’re so oblivious Madison” said Penny rolling her eyes. “She was practically humping against you on the dance-floor.”
“Come on, she was not” laughed Madison “You saw how crowded it was back there.” Penny remained quiet, but looked thoroughly unconvinced.
“Besides, what does it matter? I’m with you” said Madison taking Pennys hand “I didn’t even notice her until we collided, I was looking for you.” Penny looked at her with sparkling eyes.
“Are you jealous?” prodded Madison curiously.
“Shut up” answered Penny and pulled her in for a kiss.
“Wow, so possessive” smirked Madison between kisses, backing against the wall as Penny was leaning on her heavily. “Lucky that I prefer mad scientists to quidditch players.”
“Shut up you doofus” laughed Penny and covered her mouth with her lips. Her kiss was forceful and controlling, her tongue demanded entry which Madison gave willingly. Soon they were locked in a close embrace breathing heavily. Pennys hands were all over Madison, exploring her, grasping at her with urgency. They turned on the spot so that Pennys back was against the wall. Madison felt herself slowly loosing control of her senses once more. It happened so easily with Penny, that she wasn’t surprised anymore. She had never had the power to restrain herself with her before. Pulling away from the kiss, she looked down at her in wonder. She was breathing heavily, her cheeks flushed and her eyes a shade darker than normal. Her hair was glowing golden in the dim torchlight that illuminated the room.
“You’re so beautiful” said Madison quietly staring at her. Penny didn’t answer but closed her eyes and leaned forward. Madison kissed her again, deeper and slower this time. Her hands advanced, though more gradually, almost leisurely. Penny sighed quietly and pulled Madison closer, trying to eliminate the space between their bodies. Moving her kisses gently down to Pennys neck, Madisons hand found its way under her blouse, feeling its way tenderly and carefully over her breasts. Penny draped her arms around Madisons neck and pulled her closer. She continued leaving traces of kisses as low as Pennys blouse allowed. Again the smell of lilacs encircled Madisons senses as the flickering of firelight danced on Pennys skin. She felt electrified, her

mind unhinged in the most perfect way she could imagine. She focused on one spot on Pennys neck and sucked it softly. Penny leaned her head on the wall behind her and moaned faintly. With greediness Madison turned back to her lips and kissed her fiercely, the desperation in her movements growing again. She felt Pennys hips search for her own and pressed her core against her. They swayed in the same rhythm, grinding against the wall, kissing ferociously. Madisons last rational thought kicked its way into existence and she exhaled heavily “Penny. We should-” she started their familiar routine.
“No” interrupted Penny quickly, not opening her eyes and pulling her forcefully closer again. “Don’t” she added while pressing her hand on top of Madisons under her blouse, keeping it in place. Madison welcomed the weakness in herself, that allowed her resolve to disappear instantly. Instead she drowned herself into Penny once more, now completely unguarded. Her thigh found its place between Pennys legs and she resumed their grinding motions while their kisses escalated to a more frantic pace. Through her haze she felt Penny pushing her slightly away from her. With a sinking heart, she opened her eyes and backed away a little.
“You want to stop?” she asked panting. “No” answered Penny softly and opened the button on her trousers. Madisons eyes widened in surprise, but she didn’t have time to react as Penny pulled her back against her and returned to kissing her. Madison found that she suddenly didn’t know where to place her hands anymore, when she felt Penny take one of them and guide it downward to her belt. She could feel the hem of her underwear against her fingers and almost came undone. “Are you sure” she asked with a tremble in her voice. “Yes” sighed Penny, taking her head between her hands “I don’t want to stop anymore.” Madison swallowed and kissed her gingerly. She moved her fingers under Pennys underwear and felt like her heart was going to hammer right out of her chest. Pushing downwards, she was met with wetness and taking a shallow breath she heard Penny moan quietly. She raised her eyes to look at her and placed her other arm around her waist to keep them steady. Growing bolder by the second, she started moving her fingers in slow circles around the spot she knew would bring her most pleasure. Penny kissed her shakily and placed her arms around her neck, pushing her waist away from the wall, closer to Madisons hand. She continued circling her fingers, feeling the wetness increasing. Pennys breathing was growing more shallow and ragged and her hips grinded themselves against Madisons hand seemingly at their own will. Madison was looking at Penny in awe, she had never seen anything so beautiful. Her every movement was echoed in Pennys face which flushed under the low light as she

was taking quick breaths and trembled faintly. Penny opened her eyes again and leaned in to kiss her, exhaling soft moans through the kiss into Madisons mouth “Madison. Please” she said breathlessly. Madison slowed down for a moment to be sure “Do you want to stop?” she asked. “Don’t you dare stop!” answered Penny desperately and Madison understood what she needed. Resuming her pace, she inserted one finger into Penny slowly. Penny moaned louder and started breathing even faster, her hips moving roughly against Madison. She pushed them gingerly against the wall again, to gain balance and kissed Penny while moving her finger in her, at the same time alternating between her thumb and palm to press against her. She used her own hip as leverage and increased her speed. Penny exhaled sharply and her eyes fluttered shut. Madison saw Pennys brows furrow and her lips part as she started panting more heavily. She slowed her tempo slightly which made Penny let out a small whimper of frustration and her hips try to keep the pace going. Madison didn’t want to torture her, but inserted a second finger and picked up the pace again. Pennys head dropped on her shoulder and she let out her loudest moan yet. Her arms clenched around Madisons neck and shoulders and she started to tremble in earnest now. Madison felt her grow tighter around her fingers and knew the end was close. She curled her fingers slightly and felt Pennys fingernails digging themselves into her nape. Tightening her hold on her, preparing for what she hoped would happen, she continued her rhythm with a gradually increasing pace. “I’m going to-” breathed Penny into her ear, but she didn’t have the strength nor breath to complete her sentence. Madison didn’t answer her, instead she kissed the base of her neck that was under her nose and curling her fingers she rubbed her palm firmly against her. Penny went rigid, her muscles tensing and her hold on Madison tightened even more. After a few seconds she threw a deep shaky breath and exhaled while letting out the sweetest sound that Madison had ever heard, a sigh mixed with a moan, that Madison knew would ring in her ears forever. She felt Pennys core pulsating under her fingers as she drew her hand gently from her pants, letting out a breath she didn’t know she had been holding. Penny was still clinging to her, leaning on her heavily, small spasms rolling over her body and Madison hugged her tightly, both out of the need to be closer, but also because she felt that Penny might fall if she were to let go of her.

They stood like that for a long time, Pennys breathing calming down slowly and her legs getting back their stability. Finally Madison whispered into Pennys neck “Are you ok?”

“Yeah” answered Penny and straightening herself, she pulled away from Madison to look at her. She placed her hands around Madisons

face and looked into her eyes “Yes” she said again quietly. Her eyes were hazy and a smile danced around her lips, and Madison felt like all the happiness in the world had gathered into her heart.

Chapter 29

They didn't return to the party, but left quietly to the Gryffindor common room which was closest. Walking hand in hand, they didn't talk and Madison was starting to feel increasingly uneasy. Pennys prolonged silence unnerved her and doubts were rising in her mind. Had she said something wrong, or maybe not said the right thing at all? She sighed and glanced at Penny willing her to speak. Her unspoken persuasion did nothing however and they reached the Fat Lady. Madisons room was fortunately empty as Rowan and Tulip were still at the party. When Penny started to get ready for bed, still not saying anything, Madison couldn't take it anymore.
"Penny? Are you sure you're alright? You haven't said a word after we...after we left. Are you upset or sad or..." Madison couldn't make herself say the word disappointed out loud. "Did I do something?" she asked. Pennys eyes widened and she walked quickly from the bedside to Madison "No! Of course not! I'm sorry I've been quiet, I just really wanted to be someplace where I could hold you properly and lay down besides you. I didn't even notice I hadn't said anything, I'm sorry!"
"So you're ok? You don't...regret that we…?" asked Madison holding her breath. Penny took her hands and looked straight into her eyes. "No, not for a second! The opposite actually, I was thinking how much sooner we should have done that." Madison released a sigh "Ok, good. Let's get to bed then before the others come and we'll be up half the night."
When they were in bed, Penny threw her leg over Madison and pulled her close to herself. After they had been silent for some minutes and Madison was starting to feel her eyes droop, Penny said "There is one thing I regret." Madisons heart skipped a beat and her eyes shot wide open "What?"
"Well, that we didn't...that I couldn't...make you feel the same way."
"But you did" said Madison "I mean I didn't...come, but I felt it...I felt it all." Penny whispered into her ear "Yes, but I want to make you come too Madison." She shivered and stirred a bit "Hmm. Yes...well...I'd like that too" she mumbled, blushing in the darkness "But we have time, tonight was perfect as it was. At least for me" she finished honestly. Penny nodded "You're right, it was." She was silent for a while and then added, imitating Tonks from earlier "We should go to more parties. And when I say parties, I mean we should have more sex."

"There are too many students in this castle" whined Penny closing the

door to an occupied classroom with bewildered Slytherins inside. “There is not one room that is empty, they should expand or something.” Madison smiled at her indignation “Yes, it's almost as if they don't want the students to have an abundance of private rooms to make out in, go figure.” Penny only scoffed and walked briskly on, pulling Madison along. They had been chased out of the fifth floor corridor by a gang of disorderly third years and abandoned the fourth floor passageway when Mrs. Norris spotted them and started meowing loudly. Trying to find a quiet, uninhabited spot in Hogwarts turned out to be a harder task than they had perceived. “Come on, we have to go to potions or we’ll be late” said Madison tugging Pennys hand. She sighed and turned on her heel, grumbling incoherently under her breath as they descended to the dungeons.

Snape was already in the classroom watching them enter with disdain on his face. They gathered around the tables and Snape waved his wand as instructions appeared on the blackboard. They had to brew herbicide potion. Penny was already crushing her lionfish spines into powder when Madison finished reading the list of things to do. She smiled at Penny, evidently she had forgotten her previously grumpy mood and was now completely focused on the potion, handling her pestle deftly and efficiently. Madison started on her own task, keeping pace in Snapes class was essential if one didn't want to lose housepoints or worse. Nevertheless, her mind wandered while her hands were working and she soon found that she had been crushing her spines almost to dust. Shaking her head to get rid of images of Penny that were pushing themselves in front of her eyes like a slideshow, she leaned over her ingredients to concentrate and started measuring her mixture.

The class worked in silence for over an hour. Snape moved among them and sometimes commented on their progress. Madison was just adding flobberworm mucus to her potion, when she felt her head grow heavy. Recognizing immediately what was about to happen, she raised her hand to ask permission to leave the room. Snape didn't see her however, as he had his back turned and was testing Barnabys potion which looked like oatmeal and was smoking slowly.

“Crap!” she muttered and hesitated for a second if she should leave anyway or not. She was too late regardless, the classroom swam out of focus and she felt her body slump forward. She jerked when her head was pierced by the abrupt pain she now knew to expect. *“Don't fight me! It will be easier if you just let it happen. Open it and all will be well.”*

“Miss Steward. What do you have to say for yourself?” Snapes oily voice reached her brain. Her brothers voice was gone, her head pounded and her hands were shaking. She had slumped over her table, spilling her almost finished herbicide all over her textbook.

Snape was standing in front of her, looking ruthless.
“Huh? I...” Madison tried to think how to explain this to Snape, but was still too scattered to gather her wits. She pushed herself up and looked at the mess in front of her. “I'll clean it up, I...” she started, but Snape cut her off “Sleeping in my class has consequences Steward. Detention for example. Be here at two o'clock on Saturday.”
“But Sir, Saturday is Hogsmeade weekend!” said Madison despairingly.
“And that is what I mean by consequences” said Snape passively.
“Sir, she wasn't sleeping, she...It was an accident!” said Penny, looking at Snape seriously.
“Silence! Bottle your potions and leave a sample on my table before you leave. Saturday, two o'clock Steward!”
Madison sighed and rubbing her temple, cleared her table from the remains of her potion. Penny stayed by her side and helped her silently, wiping crushed lionfish powder from Madisons cheek. When they left the classroom she pulled Madison to the side.
“Was it Jacob again?” she asked touching Madisons forehead.
“Yes. He has the worst timing” answered Madison. “He said I shouldn't fight him, that it would be easier to let it happen.”
“How are you feeling?” asked Penny, her brow furrowed.
“Fine. The headache will pass soon, it always does” answered Madison rubbing her temples again “Come on, let's go eat and forget about it.”
Penny looked at her in concern but walked by her side to the hall. When they were eating she said gravely “This can’t go on like this. I mean Jacob speaking to you in this manner. There has to be something we could to do prevent or block him.”
“Like what?” asked Madison swallowing a gulp of pumpkin juice.
“I don’t know, but this is ridiculous. I mean he can take over at any moment. Look at what happened when you went flying! This is serious, you could get hurt. And now you got detention because of him as well.”
“Well better detention than a swim in the lake with this weather” said Madison gloomily.
“That’s not funny. There must be a way to make him stop. Have you asked Dumbledore about it?” asked Penny looking at Madison.
“No. But I would think he’d have said something if he knew of a solution” shrugged Madison.
“Maybe...You should still ask him, just to be sure” urged Penny
“Shouldn’t you tell him about today anyway? Let him know, that he made contact again?”
“What’s the point? He didn’t say anything new, besides – Dumbledore said that we have to wait for the healers to find a cure for him, that’s all we can do.”

“And then what?” asked Penny.
“What do you mean?” asked Madison perplexed.
“What happens if the healers find a cure for your brother and he regains his mind?”
“I don’t know. It depends on what his like then. If his not under the influence of the vaults...” said Madison slowly.
“Then what? He’ll go back to live with your parents and all will be well? Don’t you think your father will try to make him continue his search for the last vault?” Penny sounded agitated at Madisons lack of answers. Madison tried to imagine his brother healthy and in sound mind, living his life after the vaults. The notion seemed implausible, she couldn’t see Jacob doing anything else besides hunt for the vaults as he had for the last years. She realized, that it was impossible to imagine her brother separate from the cursed vaults, as a normal wizard with a life and a job, maybe with a family of his own. This made her feel sad, understanding how little she actually knew the one person she used to think of as her closest ally and friend.
“I don’t know Penny. I can’t control what my brother or my parents do” she answered to Penny feeling a little helpless against her demands. Penny looked at her and her expression softened “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to attack you. I know you can’t do anything, it’s just frustrating to watch him hurting you.”
“It will end sooner or later, Dumbledore said, that the healers are working on a cure” said Madison soothingly “And better he be in St. Mungo’s under surveillance than out doing Merlin knows what.”
“I suppose you’re right, we just have to be patient” nodded Penny warily.

On Saturday Madison waved the others goodbye and descended slowly to the dungeons for her detention. The sun was out for the first time in a long while and the snow glittered and sparkled invitingly, the first stirrings of spring starting to show. The unfairness of the situation made her feel resentful and a little bitter. But years of experience had taught Madison, that she had to push those emotions aside when dealing with Snape or she might end up adding days to her detention. She knocked on the heavy wooden door and pushed it open. Snape was standing behind his table adding little drops of red liquid into a large vial.
“Sit down Steward” he said not looking at her. Madison took a seat in front of him and waited. Snape continued his work without acknowledging Madisons presence in any way. That didn't disturb her, she watched with curiosity the way Snape handled his ingredients and how gently he added new drops to the largest vial. There was an effortless grace in his manners and movements, in which she

recognized similarities with Penny when she was working. Finally Snape put a stopper on the vial and placed it gently on a shelf behind his table.
“I have talked to the headmaster about you Steward” he said turning to Madison “He informed me, that you have been the subject of intrusions from your brother.”
“Y-yes” stuttered Madison, utterly taken aback by this information.
“In light of that, I revoke your detention. Since you are already here I have a proposition for you.” Madison didn’t say anything, the situation was too weird for her and she had no idea what to expect from Snape.
“The defense against legilimency is complicated and takes years of practice to master fully. But, to be aware of the technique and general concept of occlumency might not be completely useless, even to someone so inexperienced as you.”
“Occlumency? Is that something that can help me keep my brother away?” asked Madison from the edge of her seat.
“Yes. Occlumency is the art of closing ones mind against legilimency. But it needs complete control over ones emotions and as I said before – years of practice. Nourish no illusions – you will not acquire this gift after one lesson, but it might give you a starting position to start practicing and maybe in time you might hope to achieve at least some degree of knowledge on how to protect yourself. In any case, the headmaster and I agreed, that I would try to at least demonstrate the potential to you. I will stress however, that in view of your brothers powers and his special connection to you, it will be most unlikely, not to say futile to think you could block him so soon.”
Madison didn’t know what to say to that. It sounded as if Snape didn’t think she could benefit from occlumency at all and was only willing to teach her because Dumbledore had asked him to. But Madison was eager to try anything to stop Jacob and if occlumency was the way, then she was willing to give it a try, however ineffective it would be.
Snape observed her calmly “Are you ready to try?”
“Yes!” answered Madison “What do I-” But before she could finish her sentence, Snape had drawn his wand and shouted “Legilimens!”
The classroom faded from Madisons eyes and pictures from her childhood swam before her. She was sitting in her room reading when she heard her mother and father talking energetically to Jacob...She was four years old at the garden playing on her own...Eleven years old, grasping her acceptance letter to Hogwarts, bursting with happiness...In St. Mungo’s waiting for her father to come pick her up...Standing in Diagon Alley, talking to Rowan. The classroom reappeared before her eyes, she had slumped over her desk and sweat was pouring down her face. She blinked hard and wiped her brow

with the back of her hand.
“What was I supposed to do?” she asked breathing heavily.
“That was an example of a direct attack. You’ll know what to expect the next time. Clearing your mind and emptying it of emotions is the key to combat this assault.” Snape stood completely still before her, his arms crossed, evidently waiting for her to gather herself. Madison stood up and shook her head, then closing her eyes, tried to empty her mind as Snape had told to do. It was really hard, the memories she had seen were still vivid in her minds eye, most of them felt like brand new even to herself as she hadn’t thought about them for a long time.
“Legilimens!” she heard Snape shout again without warning. Again she saw images of her past flickering before her. Jacob teaching her to play chess...Walking around London aimlessly...Dancing with Penny at the Celestial Ball, her blue eyes getting closer and closer. But this time the images were different, they were less vivid, looking a little foggy as if not in focus. She concentrated and tried to suppress the burst of warmth she felt when she saw Penny. She was at Rowans birthday party, eating cake and talking with her friends...Playing quidditch with the Gryffindor team. She focused harder, trying to detach herself, make herself numb as if all those memories were not hers, but someone else's, belonging to a foreign being, whose life didn’t matter to her. Her vision cleared and she stared at the stone floor of the classroom. She had fallen over at some point without realizing. She struggled up and looked at Snape. He was watching her with raised eyebrows. “That was much better than I expected Steward” he said “You started to block me half-way through. Dumbledore was right – you are a natural it seems.”
Madison sighed and rubbed her shoulder, she must have hit it when falling. “Yeah, well I’ve been told, that I have a tendency to be withdrawn. Something I’ve been trying to work on actually.”
“Hiding ones emotions is a gift not many possess, I would suggest you not lose it. Again – Legilimens!” Once again Madisons mind was overflowing with flashes of memories. She was talking with Merula in the library...Watching her mother and father leave the house with Jacob, leaving her behind...Flying over the lake at dusk...Observing Penny stew mandrakes. This time however, the images in front of her were clouded, she saw Snape standing before her through all the memories flashing by and felt herself isolated from her recollections, as if she was watching a movie.
“Very good!” said Snape and Madisons eyes cleared. She was still standing this time, though her head was hurting in addition to her shoulder and she was feeling very weak and shaky.
“That is enough I think. You understand the essence of occlumency – complete control. You may leave” Snape turned on his heel and

started to walk out of the classroom. Madison was taken aback by this abrupt ending, but also glad that he had decided to stop, she didn't think she could have managed another try, her brain pressed on her skull and felt like someone had drilled holes in it.
“Thank you professor!” she said to Snapes back.
“Don't mention it” answered Snape slowly and deliberately, holding the door open for her. Madison understood he meant it literally and hurried out of the room back to Gryffindor tower. She was shaking all the way to the common room and kept blinking her eyes to try and vaporize the images before her. All the memories that had surfaced with Snape, kept running in circles before her eyes and she felt that if Jacob were to try and contact her now, he might be able to take over fully. She took a long shower in an attempt to clear her head and climbed into her bed. It was the middle of the day, but she didn't care, the buzzing in her brain was only growing. Pressing her palms on her forehead, she curled up under her blanket, desperately trying to stop the roller coaster in her skull.

Chapter 30

She didn't know how long she had been in bed, when she heard the door to the dormitory open.
“Madison?” Penny walked in quietly “Why are you in bed?” Madison turned and squinted her eyes at her. “Penny? What are you doing here? Why aren't you in Hogsmeade?”
“I thought I'd come back early to get some quiet” answered Penny offhandedly “What's up with you? Are you sick?” Madison explained about her detention turning into an impromptu occlumency lesson.
“And now when I know that clearing my mind is the key to block Jacob, I can't for the life of me shake the images of him that keep spinning around. I didn't even recognize most of the memories with Jacob anymore and now they are stuck, just circling back every time I close my eyes” said Madison exasperatedly. “My mind was clearer before the lesson, now I just can't...” she rubbed her fists on her temples forcefully.
“Stop that!” said Penny pulling her hands away “Lay down!” She pushed Madison back on the bed and held her hands on her side, climbing in the bed herself.
“It's fine, I just have to fall asleep or go flying or...” said Madison closing her eyes tightly, her legs bouncing under the blanket.
Penny set her hand on her chest, pressing down lightly. “It's not a good idea to go flying now, what if Jacob tries to speak again? You might not have time enough to land properly.” She watched Madison lying on her back for a while with an unreadable expression.
“Colloportus!” Madisons eyes shot open when she heard Penny cast the spell on the dormitory door. “What are you doing?” she asked bewildered.
Penny didn't answer, but stood up and started to take off her clothes slowly, keeping eye contact with Madison the whole time. She dropped her coat, took off her skirt and blouse and climbed on top of Madison only in her underwear. Madisons eyes were wide open now and her legs had stopped bouncing. “Penny...” she said carefully, but Penny leaned in and kissed her gently. Still keeping eye contact, she straddled Madison and took off her bra, dropping it on the floor next to the bed. Madison forgot to breathe, her hands twitched and rose towards Penny unconsciously. She smirked and picked the hem of Madisons tank-top while raising a questioning eyebrow at her.
Madison understood what she was asking and rose under Penny into a half-sitting position. Not wanting to block her own view for long, she tore her tank-top off of herself in a hurry and tossed it aside. She didn't lean back from her position at once, but kissed Penny and

pulled her closer. They fell back unto the bed together with Penny on top of Madison. The feeling of Pennys skin on her own was driving Madison crazy. She was so warm and soft, it made her skin feel charged. They moved somewhat, so they were on their sides, facing each other. Penny smiled at her and ran her hand across Madisons breasts, licking her lips. Madison pulled her in for a kiss that didn't end, her own hand cupping Pennys breast at the same time. They kissed lazily while caressing each other for the longest time. The castle was quiet and the only thing they heard was their own breathing which was growing heavier as their hands traveled and kisses intensified. The blanket had dropped off the bed and dusk was falling, the room growing dimmer with no lights on. Madison wriggled a little lower and started kissing Pennys neck, descending slowly but surely towards her chest. When kissing her breast, she felt Penny slipping off her underwear. She was now completely nude and Madisons brain was short-circuiting. She felt like she needed at least four more hands to keep up with the need to touch Penny everywhere and anywhere at all times. She tried to pace herself and focus, but sliding one hand over Pennys thigh to her back and then back again, a deep need stirred in her and, deciding to let it take over, she pulled Penny against herself with force. She exhaled and kissed Madison roughly, biting her lip a little. Madison responded by lowering her head and kissing her nipple. Pennys hand shot into Madisons hair and grabbed a hold of her curls. Moaning quietly she kept Madisons head at her chest and her hips bucked against her thigh. Noticing this, Madison crawled back to face Penny and kissed her more gently while slipping a hand between her legs. When she reached her, Penny released another moan into the pillow and started to move her hips against Madisons hand. Raising her gaze to her with urgency, she shifted her own hand towards Madisons boxers-shorts. Her eyes sought consent from Madisons as her hand lingered just under Madisons belly-button. Eyes wide and nodding mutely at Penny, Madison leaned in to kiss her again. When she felt Pennys fingers slide into her shorts, she froze for a second with Pennys lower lip still between her own. She opened her legs a little more and sighed. Penny and her looked at each other. Both of them were starting to breathe faster, their hips grinding into each others hands. The room around them was shadowy now, the light of early spring still too weak to face the darkness of night for long. Madison felt like her world had shrunk down to contain only Penny and the bed, she didn't see beyond anymore, nothing else existed, it was like they were in the middle of an island clinging to each other to keep themselves from falling off. She inserted a finger and grunted thickly when she felt Penny do the same to her. With shaky breaths, she resumed kissing her and pulled her half on top of

herself. She knew they wouldn't last long, but couldn't make herself slow down anymore than she could have willed her heart to stop. Penny whimpered shakily into her neck, the rhythm of her hips increasing rapidly. Madison pulled her nearer to herself with one hand and moved her other hand faster, while adding a finger. That managed to draw out an abrupt and breathy “Fuck!” from Penny, who was moving on top of her frantically, panting wildly now. Madison let her palm slide over Pennys breasts and rubbed one of her nipples before pinching it gently. She gasped and letting out a lengthy sound between a cry and a moan, she froze against Madison, her hips convulsing a couple of times against her fingers before she relaxed and slumped fully on top of Madison. She didn't move for a few moments, but then pushed her head up and kissed Madison slowly and deeply while sliding her hand, that had stopped its movements before her orgasm, back to Madisons shorts. “You don't have to, I can just-” tried Madison halfheartedly. “Shut up” answered Penny smiling at her. She moved her hand back to its original position and added two fingers at once this time around. Madisons eyes closed on their own and she grunted while her hips rose to meet Penny. She fought a losing battle with her eyelids, wanting to keep looking at Penny. She was on top of her, smiling down on her bewitchingly, looking like a dream to Madison. Her golden hair was moving quietly along with her movements and her skin was glistening slightly. Madison wanted to never stop watching her, but Penny curled her fingers and Madisons eyes closed again involuntarily as her back arched off the bed. When she felt her own orgasm nearing, she pulled Penny down and kissed her with trembling lips. She came, moaning Pennys name into her neck quietly, vibrating underneath her. When it was over, Penny collapsed against her and nestled her nose under Madisons ear. After a couple of minutes of silence Madison asked “Did you come back early from Hogsmeade to have sex?” Penny smirked into her neck “No. That...just happened. I was trying to make you stop thinking about Jacob. Did it work?”

“Who’s Jacob?” asked Madison innocently and Penny chuckled. They lay in silence for a while when Penny said “We have to get dressed, the others will be starting to return from Hogsmeade soon.” Madison grumbled, but got up, feeling very lax. Penny hobbled to her clothes and mumbled “I wish we could have our own room” while pulling her top back on. Madison thought while pulling on pants “What about the room of requirements? We could go there sometimes if we wanted to...erm...have privacy.”

Penny gaped at her “You’re a genius!” She kissed Madison and pulled her back to the bed. “Alohomora!” she said pointing her wand at the door and then snuggled up to her yawning happily.

Over the course of the next few weeks, spring finally arrived with full force. The snow melted around the castle and the sun was so bright, it gleamed off the towers and walls of Hogwarts. The students were spending as much time as possible outside, on the grounds, enjoying the warmth and freedom only new spring after a long winter can bring.
Madison spent a lot of her time on the quidditch pitch. She played friendlies with Tonks, Tulip, Charlie and whoever they could rustle up to join them, but she also occasionally joined in with the Gryffindor team practices. She didn't care either way who she was playing with, being in the air and on her broom was what mattered to her. Penny and Rowan came to watch her play some of the times, doing their homework or reading on the stands whenever they could.
The nights she didn't go flying or wasn't doing her homework she was with Penny. After discovering the room of requirement as the perfect getaway, they spent many nights in there, sneaking back to their dormitories before breakfast, trying to avoid Filch and Mrs. Norris. Madison admitted to herself, that when it came to Penny, she had lost any facade of control. She felt a constant urge to pull her into the seventh floor corridor to have her all to herself. Penny was no better, if anything she was even more insatiable than Madison. They discovered each other with wild insistence and the feeling of time wasting away when they weren’t together, even though they knew that to be untrue. The room of requirement became a sanctuary for them both. After their imperative needs were quenched, they lay in each others arms and talked for hours on end. The knowledge that no one else could enter the room with them inside, made the nights they spent there especially intimate, the feeling that Madison had after occlumency, that Penny and her were on a deserted island was present every hour they spent in the room.
Schoolwork drew them out of their little nest however and they spent a large portion of their time in the library with Rowan and Ben quizzing each other and rereading each others essays. Madison affirmed her partiality to history of magic, although even she couldn't keep her eyes open during Binns's lectures. She preferred to read about the affairs in the magical community on her own, often comparing events and timelines in magical and muggle history. Penny listened patiently to her explaining the importance of some historical incident and the corresponding outcomes and relations to the magical society. Her own enthusiasm was reserved for potions, about which she could talk for hours, although usually preferring to act rather than talk, so discussions on potions and their uses, ingredients and nuances routinely ended with Penny running off to the laboratory after being inspired to brew something new.

One morning Madison got a letter during breakfast. It was from Dumbledore asking her to pay him a visit at her soonest convenience. Feeling apprehensive, Madison skipped her planned training session for the evening and left for the seventh floor after dinner. Penny stayed in the Gryffindor tower with Tulip and Rowan to wait for her, sharing the anxiety over developments regarding Jacob.
Dumbledore greeted her kindly and she sat down in her usual seat.
“I’m afraid I have asked you here tonight to share some alarming news” said Dumbledore gravely while pouring tea into two little pink teacups in front of him. Madison didn’t answer, but straightened herself and nodded at him, bracing for whatever he was about to share with her.
“Your brother is not in St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries anymore. He escaped custody, or rather was broken out yesterday evening.”
Madisons stared at him “Someone helped him brake out?”
“Yes. He is in no state to conceive a plan of escape himself at this time. Yesterday evening he had visitors who stupefied the head healer in Janus Thickey Ward and disguised your brother before leaving. His absence was not discovered for hours as the ward is not heavily populated and the spell they cast on mrs. Rosina Gears was rather strong, she needed healing herself. She will make a full recovery however” added Dumbledore after seeing the horrified expression on Madisons face.
“Who was it? Do they know? Was it...did my parents…?” asked Madison holding her breath.
“No. They do not know who they were, but I have made inquiries and I can say with certainty, that your parents were not in St. Mungo’s that evening” Dumbledore watched Madison heave a sigh of relief before continuing “I’m afraid though, that the wizards or witches who helped your brother escape were members of the League of Seven. Whether your parents were aware of their plan or not, I can not say.”
Madison slumped back in her chair, her hand holding the teacup Dumbledore had handed her trembling “Why? What good would braking him out do? The healers were so close to finding a cure. They want him healthy don’t they?”
“Ah. There’s another piece of distressing news I have the regrettable obligation to pass on – the cure the healers were working on did not work.”
“What?” exclaimed Madison “They tried already? They got the dragon eyes and...other stuff?”
“They did. They were donated anonymously as I found out yesterday. The healers didn’t question the donation and brewed the potion right after receiving the ingredients. Unfortunately the potion did not

produce the results they were hoping for."
"They were donated? Isn't that a little weird?" asked Madison perplexedly.
"Indeed" said Dumbledore crossing his fingers and leaning back in his chair "but the healers were eager to try and since the donation was anonymous..." he parted his hands in a subdued gesture.
"But...couldn't the donation come from the League of Seven?" asked Madison her brow furrowed.
"I think it most likely" nodded Dumbledore "I rather think they wanted to help the healers to hurry the process but when they found out, that the potion failed, their patience ran out and triggered the plan to brake Jacob out themselves."
"And now? He's missing? He's in the hands of the League?" asked Madison exasperatedly.
"I'm afraid so" answered Dumbledore somberly "I have written to your parents, but have gotten no reply so far. The situation has taken a more sinister turn I'm afraid. With the League of Seven in control of your brother, we have lost our direct link to him and so our upper-hand in this serious affair. We have no means to keep track of him nor his well-being." Dumbledore surveyed Madison over his spectacles "Do you think your parents might divulge more information to you if you were to ask them about your brother?"
Madison contemplated this for a moment "I don't know...we don't write to each other...but when ever we do talk, it is most usually about Jacob, especially now..."
Dumbledore nodded slowly "Well then, I don't mean to pressure you, but if you do talk to your parents and find out something about Jacobs current location, or anything else really – I must ask you to share that information. There is an ever present danger to this school and its students while your brother might still try to enter the vaults, as I am sure you understand."
"Of course" agreed Madison "I don't know how I can ask them though, I was planning on staying here for the Easter holidays and they don't answer my letters either..."
"No, I think it wise for you to not leave the school during holidays. The League of Seven might be aware of your brothers attempts to contact you and they might try and help him. It would be advisable for you to stay here, however -" Dumbledore smiled "We might have a happy occasion we could use to our advantage coming up. I don't want to spoil the surprise too early however so I won't say anymore right now. Just bear in mind, that whatever you could find out might help us immensely."
Madison looked at Dumbledore curiously but knew better than to ask for explanations.

“Ok, will do. Thank you for the tea headmaster.”
“Not at all, tea usually helps in these situations. I do hope I can offer you a cup without simultaneously passing grave news one day.” He winked at Madison kindly and she smiled at him lightly “Me too professor.”

Chapter 31

Madison was balancing a book about the wizards of ancient Greece on her goblet when Penny sat across from her. "You shouldn't read during meals you know" she said eyeing Madisons book.
"I can't put it down, it's fascinating. Did you know about Circe? I think McGonagall mentioned her once." Madison launched into a rant about the wizards of ancient Greece and the freedoms they possessed compared to modern times.
"You see how there's a clear parallel between the laws of that time and the outcome, both in muggle and wizarding worlds?" she asked Penny passionately. She looked at her with an affectionate smile on her face "You're such a dork sometimes. Your book is dipping into your pumpkin juice by the way."
Madison jerked and raised her book up quickly, waving it around while searching for her wand.
"Oh no, Pince will kill me if this leaves a mark." She quickly cast the hot-air charm and pointed her wand at the book. Fortunately the book dried with no visible marks being left on its pages. Madison sighed in relief and looked at Penny while moving her wand in circles around the book.
"What do you mean a dork? Aren't you the one who spent hours explaining the differences between the uses of valerian sprigs and Lethe river water to me?"
"That's completely different" said Penny dismissively.
"How is that different?" laughed Madison.
"Well for one thing, that was actually interesting. You know they are both used in forgetfulness potion, however-"
Madison shook her head and covered her ears "No-no-no, don't start again! You already talked about this for three hours straight just yesterday. I love you, but if I can't talk about Circe, you don't get to discuss valerian sprigs either."
Penny fell silent and stared at Madison with wide-eyes.
"What?" asked Madison "What's wrong? Oh alright, you can talk about the sprigs" she sighed resignedly.
"No...I don't want to talk about the sprigs" said Penny very quietly "You said you love me."
Madison gaped at her for a second and then realized in astonishment, that she had indeed said I love you to Penny. She had known that what she felt for Penny was love for a long time now, but had been too scared to admit it openly, fearing that she would seem too brash or premature. Now it had burst out of her nevertheless and there was no going back.

"Yes...I did...I do..." Madison perused around the great hall taking a deep breath before looking straight at her "I'm in love with you Penny!" she admitted, feeling both liberating excitement and equally crippling dread settle in her chest. Pennys eyes were huge as she listened to her and she opened her mouth to answer, but at that precise moment Dumbledore spoke loudly over the hall.
"Good evening everyone! I hope you have been nourished and are full of energy to conquer new academical challenges." Penny closed her mouth, she and Madison stared at each other, waiting for Dumbledore to finish talking.
"I have some exciting news for all of you. The school board has decided in the last minute, to combine two very special events this year. The spring ball takes place this Saturday and to make it even more extraordinary, the board has decided to invite your parents to participate. The owls have already been dispatched with the invitations. Most of your parents have attended this school themselves, so this return to their alma mater serves as sort of an alumni gathering concurrently with the celebration of a new spring. I must admit that the staff, myself included, are very eager to see our old students again, as you must be eager to reunite with your parents after weeks of separation."
The hall was buzzing excitedly. The news seemed to go over well and students were gathering in small groups all around to discuss the coming occasion. Dumbledore persisted and raised his voice "The ball will be held in the great hall, with live music, on Saturday evening. Your parents should arrive on Saturday morning so you all have enough time to show them around your favorite classrooms and study-areas" Dumbledore smiled and continued "Similarly with the Celestial Ball, you all may bring a date with you to the dance. That is all, goodnight everyone!"
Madison looked at Penny. She was frowning at Dumbledore and looking like she was waiting for him to keep talking. Madison figured that the ball must have been the occasion Dumbledore had meant when he last talked with her. He was overly optimistic though, in Madisons opinion, thinking that the Stewards would attend such an event. She herself was sure, that they would not make and appearance and she wouldn't get a chance to talk with them before the summer holidays. Rowan sat down next to Penny and started talking immediately.
"Another ball! And our parents! This is the best news. I really miss my parents, it will be so cool to have them around for a while. Aren't you excited?" she was practically bouncing on her seat. Madison smiled at her "I'm excited about the ball of course, the last one ended too soon for my taste. But I don't think my parents will come." Rowan looked

horrified “Oh, I’m sorry Madison, I didn’t think...”
“Never mind them. It will be cool to see your parents again though” she smiled kindly at Rowan who beamed back at her.
“What about you Penny?” asked Rowan “Excited?”
Penny looked absentminded “Huh? Yeah…yes I’m excited. I’m sorry, I have to go, I forgot to write the end of this essay” she said vaguely and left the hall. Madison couldn’t help noticing, that she had left without kissing her goodbye nor mentioning their previous topic. She slumped a little, feeling that she had messed up somehow.

Madison was completely unable to focus on her lessons during the next days. All she could think about was where Jacob was and what was the league doing with him. She reasoned, that the league meant no harm to him, at least not in the physical sense, but if their aim was the vaults, they might have robbed Jacob of his chance at a normal life. She had begun to hope that the healers would cure him and maybe then she could talk to him as they had when they were younger. Maybe she could have reasoned with him, persuade him to let the vaults go and start a new life.
It didn't help Madisons concentration, that Penny seemed to be avoiding her after the announcement during dinner. She didn’t see her for the whole day and felt worse by the second. She cursed herself inwardly for her outburst, judging it the reason for Pennys absence. Feeling that Snape had been right when he had lectured her about the importance of keeping ones emotions hidden, she dragged her backpack from one class to another, daydreaming about a spell to turn back time.
On Friday Madison left the castle right after classes ended and went flying. Kicking off from the ground, she stayed near the treetops at first. Concentrating hard on clearing her mind, she tried to push all thoughts of Jacob and Penny aside. She kept her eyes on the horizon and focused on the feel of the broom handle between her fingers and the way the setting sun threw out her last rays before fading behind the forest. She felt her insides harden, as if her body was trapping the feelings in itself. Over time her movements became more deliberate, her thoughts more centralized. She felt calmer and stronger than before, but also strangely wistful. It was a feeling of returning, she remembered herself from months ago and realized with a jolt, how much she had changed. She accepted the change with a somber concession and raised the handle to fly higher. The gust of wind on her face gave her little pleasure, she was speeding as fast as her broom could handle and well above the treeline, but felt only the stillness of solitude. No sense of freedom enveloped her, no feeling of release nor joy came from her sprint. She gave up soon and descended near the

castle. Snape may be right to keep his emotions hidden, but Madison thought she understood more about why the potions professor was always so bad-tempered. Feeling she had not achieved what she wanted with the flight, she headed straight to the room of requirements to train.

Saturday morning Madison woke to the sounds of Tulip and Rowan discussing the ball excitedly. She realized with a sinking feeling, that she had not seen Penny for almost two days. Yawning, she got out of the bed and headed for the showers. When she got back, Rowan had already left for breakfast. Tulip bumped into her at the door.
“Hurry up or you’ll miss breakfast” she said when passing her “Oh and find Penny. She came looking for you yesterday evening, said she needed to talk to you urgently. Probably a new potion she wants you to test” she smirked and hurried away. Madison got dressed quickly and descended to the hall. The corridors were more crowded than usual, there were people walking around every corner Madison turned and on the staircases as well. For a moment she thought that breakfast had ended already, before realizing that the parents of students had started to arrive. She saw Tonks on her way to the great hall and she waved her over enthusiastically.
“Madison! Come meet my parents!” Madison approached her and saw that she was standing besides a jolly looking blonde man and an elegant tall witch.
“This is Madison, one of my best friends” announced Tonks happily “Madison - these are my parents Ted and Andromeda.” Madison smiled politely, feeling a warm flush from Tonks’s introduction.
“It’s really nice to meet you” she said shaking their hands.
“So you’re Silvers youngest? I never met your brother, but I have met your parents on an occasion” said Ted Tonks, but didn’t elaborate his statement. Madison sagged a little, she had for a moment forgotten her family and the fact that her name came with a backstory for most of the wizarding families.
“Any news about your brother?” asked Ted. Madisons brows furrowed, she hadn’t thought the news of her brothers escape from St. Mungo’s was general knowledge. Andromeda placed a hand on Teds shoulder “Stop grilling the poor girl. How could she know anything about that. Besides, families are complicated as we all know” she looked at her husband pointedly “We are very glad that Tonks has found such a good friend, we all need as many of them as possible during these hard times” she finished smiling kindly at Madison.
“Ok, come on now, I want to show you the secret passage that saved me from Filch last week” said Tonks and started pulling her parents along.

“Why did you need saving from Filch?” Andromeda asked apprehensively and Madison watched as Tonks waved at her and grinned to her mother “I was carrying too many library books.” Andromeda rolled her eyes at her daughter but she and Ted followed her all the same.
Madison turned to the great hall and her heart jumped – Penny was standing at the door looking around impatiently. When their eyes met, she ran up to her at once.
“There you are, I’ve been waiting for you. Where have you been?” she asked, still looking around fervently. “I need to talk to you” she continued without waiting for Madisons reply “About my parents-”
“Ah! There you are! We thought you planned to ditch us” the merry sound came from a short plump man who approached Madison and Penny with a beautiful blonde witch who Madison immediately recognized as Pennys mother – they were so alike. Standing on either sides of Penny, the man who Madison supposed was her father, placed his arm around Penny “No escaping us today kid, we’re stuck with you for the whole day.” He looked eagerly around, bouncing on his heels, surveying the hall and the students with interest. Pennys mother was tall and thin, almost fragile looking. Her eyes were virtually identical to Pennys, large and kind, but when Pennys eyes were crystal blue, hers were darker, steelier.
“Hello there! Are you a friend of our daughters?” asked Pennys mother smiling at Madison.
“Err...I’m...” Madison was looking at Penny, there was something bothering her, she appeared nervous and a little frightened. Looking at the floor she sighed and mumbled “Mom, dad – this is Madison...my girlfriend.” Silence followed Pennys statement.
“Madison? Madison Steward?” asked Pennys mother sharply. Madison nodded mutely, feeling apprehensive.
“So you two are still together?” asked Pennys mother from Madison with a stern voice.
“Err..” Madison had no idea how to reply to that. What did she mean still together?
“She saved Beatrice mom” said Penny in a small voice from between her parents.
“I am aware. And we are truly grateful of course” said her mother evenly, nodding at Madison “but you do understand, that it was because of her brother Jacob, that Beatrice was inside that portrait to begin with.”
“Honey, we talked about this. I mean...the things your mother has told me about her family...You know how we feel about them” added Pennys father. Madison looked at Penny, but she kept her eyes firmly on the ground.

“Could…you…could you please not talk about me as if I’m not here?” asked Madison quietly.
Pennys mother gave her a severe glance, but answered calmly:
“I apologize Madison. We didn’t mean to be impolite. You must understand, we are truly grateful to you for saving Beatrice. Dumbledore wrote to us about what you did and we can never truly express our gratitude in accordance to your actions in the vaults. But–” she halted and took a deep breath before continuing “Given your background and relations, it can’t be a surprise to you that we are concerned about Penny.” Madison tried to catch Pennys eyes again, but she was still looking at her shoes, her head bent.
“Have you thought about your life after school?” asked Pennys father “I have been living with a witch for many years now and from what I understand, there are different kinds of wizards. And your parents are…” he halted, looking around for an ending to his sentence, but left it hanging with a small shrug. “Well you understand don’t you?”
“We hear your brother has escaped St. Mungo’s” announced Pennys mother “Have you thought about what could happen if he got back in here and tried to resume his mad search for the vaults? He could try and involve Penny somehow if he knew how close the two of you were. For all we know you would want to help him and–” At that Penny finally raised her head angrily “Madison would never let anything-”
“Yes dear!” interrupted her mother irritably “But you can’t know what could happen with that family can you? I mean – who could have foreseen Beatrice being stuck inside a portrait for Merlin’s sake! It is best to stay away from all that.” She looked at her daughter gently “You are so smart Penny! You must understand, that all this is folly, it is only a crush. You are so young, you have a brilliant future ahead of you. This is a time to think about your education and the future, not about curses and vaults and Merlin knows what else. It is not safe to mingle with…” she looked at Madison and fell silent.
Indignation flared in Pennys eyes and she looked at her mother “It’s not like that. I’ve told you! Madison is not–”
“I know you think that” interrupted her mother again “but how can you be sure? Really?”
“I’m not my family” said Madison quietly but with intensity. “I’m bound with them by blood, but that doesn’t mean anything. I would never hurt Penny.”
“We don’t trust you with our daughter, alright!” said Pennys mother loudly with force. “I’m sorry to be blunt, but try and look at this from our perspective.”
Before Madison could open her mouth to answer, Rowan ran up to them from behind.

“Madison! There you are. My mother is dying to see you” she declared loudly “Oh! Excuse me, I didn’t mean to interrupt.” She looked around sheepishly. Complete silence fell among the little group. Penny was looking at her parents with anger and shrugged her fathers hand off her shoulder. The Haywoods kept their mouths shut and stared at the walls around them tensely.
Rowan was looking around with wide eyes and finally piped in a high pitched nervous voice “It’s really nice to meet you!” That seemed to shake the Haywoods out of their haze and Pennys father replied to her with an absent smile “You too dear.” Another silence fell while Madison looked into Pennys eyes. She was staring back at her with a pleading look, but didn’t say anything. Rowan was observing both of them in befuddlement and when the silence dragged on she blurted loudly “I’m sorry, I must take Madison to meet my mother, I told her I would be right back. It was nice to meet you!” She took Madisons hand and pulled her away. Looking back over her shoulder, Madison saw Pennys parents both talking to Penny with quiet voices and Penny looking after her with panicky eyes.
Rowan pushed her around the corner, away from the entrance hall and up against the wall.
“What is going on? What was that?” she asked impatiently.
“Pennys parents don’t want us together” answered Madison dully.
Rowan let out a low whistle.
“And you didn’t know?”
“No, I didn’t.”
“What did Penny say?”
“Not much” answered Madison feeling dazed.
“But why? Because of your brother?” asked Rowan.
“My brother, the portrait vault, my family, all of it I suppose. Her mother said, that they didn’t trust me.”
Rowan was quiet for a moment and then said in an unconvincing voice “Don’t worry about it too much. All parents worry. I mean that’s in their handbook. When they get to know you…”
“They weren’t too eager to get to know me” answered Madison bitterly.
“Well it won’t matter to Penny.”
“Won’t it?” asked Madison desperately “They are really close. And she didn’t tell me that they didn’t approve.” Rowan remained silent after this.
“What now?” she finally asked taking a step back from Madison.
“I don’t know. I think I’ll go out for a walk, I don’t want to run into them again.”
“Right. But before you go? My mom is waiting for me in the muggle studies classroom, I promised I’d return with you. If your up for it?”

she asked tentatively.
“Of course, let’s go!” said Madison, feeling like her insides had done a barrel roll.
Rowans mother hugged her enthusiastically and immediately invited her back to their farm for the summer holidays. They chatted for a bit but Madison made her excuses after she started prodding her gently for news about Jacob.

Chapter 32

Madison ducked into a hidden passage to get out of the castle without being seen. She made it back to the entrance hall which was now mercifully empty and almost ran out of the large doorway. She jogged towards the Forbidden Forest, figuring that to be the last place any student would take their parents for a walk. When she was nearing the trees she looked around – there was no one around, she had left all the happy families chatting among themselves behind her. She entered the forest and sat down under a large elm and leaned her back against the wide trunk. She could see the school and the grounds from her position, but as she had hoped, no one came near the sinister looking forest.

The ground was still half frozen, and exuded cold, Madison wished she had taken her wand with her or at least had the sense to get her coat before leaving the castle. Hugging her knees, she made herself as small as possible to keep warm. She had left the school in such a hurry because if she had to listen to one more person ask her about Jacob she thought she might have lost it and started screaming at them, or worse. To see all the happy families at once affected her more than she had thought it would. So many parents with their children, chatting excitedly, eager to learn about their day-to-day lives, sharing each others joys and struggles. It was too much for Madison to take in at once. And Penny…

Madison pulled her knees closer to her chest, shivering slightly. Hundreds of thoughts ran through her mind when she tried to reason with herself. Why hadn't Penny told her about her parents. Had she thought that she could change their minds? Maybe she hadn't been sure they would last and didn't want to upset her parents further with something she thought was a passing thing? But it had been months now, surely that couldn't be the reason. Madison felt anger flaring in her at Pennys parents. How could they judge her with such ease, without even trying to get to know her first? When she examined herself honestly however, she knew why she felt so defeated learning that Pennys parents reacted the way they did. She couldn't really blame them. Who would want their child dating the offspring of known pureblood fanatics, with a brother who had recently tried to kill their other daughter on top of that. With greater severity than ever before did Madison feel the impact of her upbringing and background. There were undeniably things to be ashamed about her family. It was hard to admit, when she herself had told her mother about Penny at the first opportunity she had gotten. And Madison could count on one hand the times she had shared any personal

information with her parents. She knew why Penny came up in her conversation with Cassia though – Madison was proud of her, she felt lucky and honored to be in a relationship with someone like Penny. The realization of the chance that the exact reverse might be true for Penny, made her heart ache.
The chill seeping through her jumper made Madison get up and leave the solitude of the forest. She started walking back towards the school slowly. Remembering Snapes words, she focused hard on pressing down her emotions and started feeling a bit calmer at once. After all, she definitely wasn't the only student whose parents were absent, nor the only one with a complicated family. Feeling resolve settling on the hurt, she decided to wait out the day in her room and talk to Penny first chance she got. There was the ball in the evening of course, but Madison gathered that Penny couldn't go with her while her parents were there and pushed it out of her mind along with another little burst of misery the thought had woken.

Madison had almost reached the main entrance when she heard her name called. Raising her head to look around, she froze on the spot and blinked – her parents were walking toward her energetically.
"Finally, we've been looking for you for over half an hour. Where where you hiding?" asked Silver looking annoyed.
"What are you doing here?" croaked Madison, not moving.
"What kind of a question is that? Surely you are aware that today is the alumni gathering and the spring ball. We were invited of course."
"And you actually came?" asked Madison feeling shocked.
"Why shouldn't we have?" asked her father looking around anxiously "We have both graduated from this school and our daughter goes here, why shouldn't we come to spend time with you?"
Madisons brow furrowed, something was going on, her parents were acting completely contrary to their usual selves. She gawked at them, her mouth hanging open. There they were, standing before her as if this level of involvement was something normal and ordinary for them. Her father seemed nervous, he was sweating slightly, despite the chill in the air and he was looking around a lot, not making eye contact with Madison. Cassia was the complete opposite, she was standing serenely beside Silver and looked at Madison with a faint smile and almost blank eyes.
"Well then? Aren't you going to give us the grand tour? How about we get started, we don't have all day you know" Silver took a hold of Cassias elbow and nudged her gently "Let's go!" They started to walk towards the courtyard without another word. When Madison didn't move, her father turned and looked at her for the first time "Aren't you coming?" he asked, sounding tense. Madison stepped beside her

mother, still gaping at both of them in disbelief.
“I still don’t understand” said Madison finally “Why come now? You’ve never…we don’t even…are you…What’s going on?” she asked dubiously. Her mother didn’t look at her anymore, but kept a steady pace toward the corridor nearest to the courtyard. She moved strangely, usually she almost glided, her long legs hardly touching the ground, but now she was tramping her feet, like she had been marching for a long time.
“Are you ok mom?” asked Madison looking at her curiously.
“She’s fine!” snapped Silver and placed his hand on her elbow again.
“I’m fine” said Cassia in a hollow voice, not turning her head to face Madison.
They reached the corridor which was empty. Madisons parents kept on walking side by side.
“Has something happened? Do you know where Jacob is?” asked Madison desperately, jogging along at their side. At this, her father turned and looked at her “Let’s not talk about Jacob today alright? Let’s just…walk around a little bit.” While he said this, Cassia kept on moving as if she had not heard Madison at all. The feeling in her gut, that something was wrong increased and Madison halted.
“No. Just stop! Where are you even going? Aren’t I supposed to show you around? And besides, you must realize, that I have questions. What about Jacob? You know something don’t you? You’re in the League of Seven, did you know they were going to break him out? Do you know where he is now and what they are planning to do with him?” Silver placed a hand on Cassias shoulder and she stopped. Her mother didn’t turn around to face her but just stood in the middle of the corridor with her back turned to her.
“I should have know it wasn’t going to be easy with you. Nothing ever is” said Silver quietly with a voice that sent chills down Madisons spine.
“What is-” she started, but then threw herself on the floor instinctively. Her father had drawn his wand and something in him made Madison react without thinking. She had been right – white glowing mist flew over her, originating from his wand.
“What are you doing?” bellowed Madison jumping up quickly. Her father was in front of her with two long strides. Slap! Madison fell back to the floor, tasting blood.
“Why are you always making things difficult?” her father hissed at her, raising his wand again.
“Hey! Get away from her!” Madison looked behind her – Merula was running toward them, fumbling in her pockets for her wand.
“No! Get back!” yelled Madison at her, but too late, her father had been ready, his spell hit Merula straight in the chest and she froze, her

eyes wide with shock and one of her hands still in her pocket. After a second, she keeled over to her side, completely frigid. Silver had obviously used a full body-bind curse on her, though he had not said the spell out loud. Wandless and on the ground, her lip bleeding, Madison looked up at her father in disbelief. She didn't have time to say anything however, as Silver cast another spell at her. Suddenly Madison felt completely relaxed and at ease. Everything was alright, she was happy. Only vaguely wondering why she was on the floor, she got up and stood smiling faintly.
"Come along!" said Silvers voice in her head and she obeyed calmly. She walked behind her parents, turning her back on Merula laying frozen on the corridor floor.

They walked for only a couple of minutes, when Cassia stopped suddenly and Madison collided with her. She stopped too and looked around with a fuzzy expression.
"Is this it?" asked her father from Cassia. She nodded slowly and turned to look at Madison. A small voice was starting to make itself heard in Madisons head. *"Watch out!"* it said *"you are not safe, don't listen to them!"* She didn't like it, she felt so peaceful and calm and the little voice was like a tiresome fly she couldn't swat away.
"Here?" asked Silver from Cassia while pointing at the statue of Wilfred the Wistful they were standing next to. She nodded without saying anything, still keeping her eyes on Madison.
"Come here!" said Silver roughly to Madison while pulling out his wand again. *"No! Don't!"* said the little voice to Madison and she stumbled. She had started to move and tried to stop at the same time.
"Come on!" bellowed Silver and pulled her nearer by her jumper. He took her hand and placed her palm above the stone goblet Wilfred the Wistful was holding. Making a sharp slashing movement with his wand, a large gash appeared across Madisons palm and blood started to flow freely from it. Silver held her wrist so that the blood flowing from it fell into the goblet. The statue shook when the blood hit the goblet and started to rattle violently. Slowly, with loud scraping and scratching noises, Wilfred started to move. He pulled out his other hand that had been hidden behind the stony folds of his robe and reached it towards them slowly. When he stopped moving, his hand was outstretched as if reaching to accept something and Silver released Madisons wrist to look at Cassia.
"We have to take this?" he asked. Again Cassia nodded mutely. Silver took Madisons hand into his left one and Cassias to his right one. He placed all of their hands together on top of Wilfreds outstretched palm. Suddenly pain erupted in Madisons hand, she hadn't felt the wound her father had given her until now. The feeling of fuzzy

content dissolved and all the rage and hurt came back with an awful flash. In a split second she jerked her hand to brake away from Silver and Cassia, but was too late – the walls of the corridor started spinning around her, the only still things the faces of her parents. Everything around them turned black and Madisons stomach lurched unpleasantly. She closed her eyes against the whirling going on around her.

Just as suddenly as it had started, everything stopped, her body collapsed and she was able to pull her hand away from the stone fingers of Wilfred. Opening her eyes carefully, she felt her heart thumping and blood rushing in her ears. She was lying on a stone floor in a room she had not seen before, the statue of Wilfred the Wistful was standing behind her, completely still again, his hand still outstretched. Her father was standing next to her but her mother was also lying on the floor, face down. The room was octagon shaped and rather small. There were no windows or doors, but a glowing ornament, echoing the shape of the room stood in the middle. It looked like a mirror, but instead of reflecting, it glittered dimly and Madison wasn't sure if the shining surface was solid or liquid – it seemed to move around in itself and the beams of light emanating from it changed their position all the time.
Silver looked around with a wild gleam in his eyes.
"We're here! We made it!" Madison scrambled to her feet "Where are we?" she asked, though she was sure she knew the answer. His father didn't respond, but turned to help Cassia up. She hadn't made a move to get up from the floor on her own, but followed at Silvers tugging immediately. He pulled her up and looked at his watch.
"Any moment now. We should wait, just to be sure." Madison backed against the wall and looked at them. Silver was staring at Cassias face eagerly, still sweating profusely. Madisons mother just stood at the same spot, looking around with a distant smile as if she wasn't sure where she was. Madison had no concept of time, maybe only seconds passed, but maybe it had been more, she didn't dare move or ask anymore questions. Suddenly Cassias features began to change before their eyes – her hair receded and turned darker, she shrank a little, losing height and her shoulders broadened. Madison felt her chest tighten in a fresh wave of panic – she understood now what had happened. Jacob stood before her at the same spot where seconds ago the figure of her mother had been. Silver smiled maniacally and pointed his wand at him. A flash of white mist flung from Jacob and the vague, fuzzy expression was replaced with the same blank one that Madison remembered from her visit to St. Mungo's. Her father had used the imperius curse on both of them and had just removed it

from her brother.
Silver turned to Madison and the smile faded from his face, though the manic glint was still evident in his eyes.
“I think you comprehend what is going on Madison. I’m sorry it had to be like this, but since you declined to help your brother freely, we had no other choice. It will be over soon, don’t make it anymore difficult now that we are finally inside.”
Madison swallowed and stared at her father and brother “What do you need me anymore? We are in, my blood got you in. What do you want from me now?” she asked with a tremble in her voice.
“Well as you can see, Jacob is not yet back to his usual self. We need you to help him. You must touch the heart of the vault with him. He will be cured and all will be well.”
“The heart of the vault? You mean that thing?” Madison pointed at the glowing ornament in the middle of the room “And what will it do?”
“Jacob says, it will transfer energy from you to him. You could help him, make amends for your past betrayals.” Silver was slowly moving closer to Madison, she had nowhere to go, her back was against the wall. Panic and fear crippled her, she felt her knees shake and her mouth went dry. In a last desperate attempt she tried reasoning with her father.
“You don’t know for sure what will happen, do you? The dangers in the vaults are unknown, isn’t that true? Look at what happened when he opened the last one, and the ones before that! Dad, you have to listen to me – we cannot do this, we have to go back and get him to St. Mungo’s. This is madness!”
Silver laughed coldly “Do you really think Jacob doesn’t know what will happen? The only reason he hasn’t already achieved his destiny is you! You are the reason everything went wrong, you were supposed to help him and instead you betrayed him when he needed you most. Fortunately you have the opportunity to pay him back tonight.” Silver looked over his shoulder back to Jacob and said emphatically “He will be the master of the vaults. He was born to do this. I have known it ever since he was a baby.” He turned back to Madison “And you will not screw things up again, I’m going to make sure of that this time.”
Madisons breaths turned ragged, she felt like she had run a mile
“What about me dad? Don’t you care what happens when we touch it? Am I not your child too?” she tried to sound callous and indifferent, but felt a tear dropping on her cheek and knew she had failed. Snapes words echoed in her ears and she briefly wondered for the first time over the true depths of occlumency.
“He is the chosen one!” bellowed Silver loudly. “Why can’t you understand that! He will be the most powerful wizard this earth has

ever seen. Can you not understand the magnitude of this? Of him? You are just another child, insignificant in the grand scheme. But you can help him achieve his greatness, can you not fathom how important this is?"

Madison closed her eyes, she felt like someone had emptied a bucket of ice water over her. She had always sensed it when growing up, but had never let herself believe it fully. She couldn't deny it any longer now that her father had confirmed it all. For a moment she wanted to forget everything and just touch the heart so that it would all end and her father and Jacob could get what they wanted. But then the image of Penny rose from deep within and with her the flare of warmth and hope and strength. The faces of Rowan, Tulip, Tonks and all her friends swam before her and she knew that she had to go on. She would fight until she could to keep them and the rest of the school safe.

Chapter 33

Madison took a deep breath and lunged at her father. They toppled over on the stone floor together with Madison on top. She pressed her knee in her fathers stomach to keep him still and with both hands made a grab for his wand. Silver yelled in anger and his left hand clenched around Madisons throat. He was taller than Madison and he held his right hand high above his head, to guard his wand. Grunting, he threw Madison away from himself by her throat and she fell against the wall, but scrambled up quickly and made another lung at him. Slap! For the second time during the day Madison tasted blood in her mouth, this time she staggered, but didn't fall. She pulled her arm back and flung her fist at her father with full force. A dull cracking noise followed and blood spurted from his nose unto his robes. Silver uttered a loud groan, more out of rage than pain and raised his wand. He slashed it downwards in a sharp movement and a purple light passed across Madisons chest as she was just about to hit him again. She wavered and her hand fell from its raised position. There where no cuts or slashes on her, but she felt the inside of her chest clench and then razor-sharp pain erupt. She faltered again, almost collapsing on the floor, clutching her ribs with both hands. Silver didn't stop, he closed the gap between them and backhanded Madison across the face with full force so that she toppled against the wall behind her. He didn't let her fall to the floor however, but pulled her up by her jumper forcefully "You will do as you are told! I will not let you wreck this! Come on!" he yelled, little flecks of spit flying from his mouth, his face red and veins pulsating on his forehead. Jacob hadn't moved or talked during this exchange, he was standing on the same spot as before, staring blankly at the heart of the vault.
"He will be the chosen one!" shouted Silver and dragged Madison by her collar to Jacob. Taking Jacobs arm, Silver pushed them both towards the glowing light and grabbed their hands. Madison was so out of breath, she felt like she was choking. She had no strength left in her to fight her father, there was blood running down from her nose, lip and eyebrow, but it was the consistent severe ache in her chest, that made her feel like she couldn't breath, stopping her. Silver pulled their hands with both of his own and pushed them against the heart with a grunt.
A sharp blinding light erupted in the small room and Silver was thrown backwards away from the ornament immediately. Madison felt herself raising in the air and saw that the same thing was happening to Jacob. The room was so bright, that it was hard for her to keep her eyes open. Blinking in confusion she tried to look around. Silver was

on his knees beside the statue of Wilfred and squinted his eyes at them, covering his face with the back of his arm. Jacobs eyes however were wide and exalted, a jubilant glint in them, that scared Madison more than anything else that had happened before. They remained hovering in the air next to the ornament, about seven or eight feet from the floor and Madison was starting to hope that nothing else would happen, when little beams of light started moving from the ornaments surface towards them. Two trails of them separated from the heart, one moving towards Jacob and the other towards Madison. She tried to struggle to move further from the sparks, but felt like invisible ropes were holding her loosely at her place. Jacob on the other hand was trying to push himself nearer the sparks. Neither of them was successful and the lights reached them at the same time. They melded inside Madison and she closed her eyes, bracing for more pain or something worse. But nothing happened, she didn't feel anything at all. Opening her eyes again, she looked at Jacob. He was looking at her too and Madisons eyes grew – Jacobs eyes were clear and he was smiling at her.
"Well done little sister" he said, his smile growing.
"Thank you for my health! Though I should thank father instead I suppose" he added and looked at Silver down below them. He didn't answer, but grinned with a psychotic expression at them, still on his knees.
"Don't worry about your failures anymore. I can make sure that you do your part from now on. You can rest easy" Jacob said calmly, while watching Madison struggle against her invisible bonds.
"I know the burdens you have carried. I have felt the struggle you had with this. I'm sorry that you chose to resist it, but it doesn't matter anymore. Our family will reach the destiny that was promised, no matter your choices. You will thank me after...if you can of course. I must admit I'm curious to see what the outcome will be for you."
"Jacob! Please! You don't know what you are doing!" Madison yelled at him. He grinned at her.
"On the contrary little sister, I'm the only one who knows what they are doing. You, the League, even father don't know. You are all only playing your parts."
Small balls of light were still moving from the ornament towards them, dissolving into them while the brightness in the room only increased.
"Though maybe in hindsight I should have prepared you more. I thought I played my part superbly, but it seems that you required more of an effort. You always were a needy kid, even when we were younger. Fortunately I am prepared after the last vault. I know now that there is no reasoning with you."

“Reasoning with me?” bellowed Madison wildly “You’re trying to steel powers the world has not seen from a cursed vault and I’m the one who needs reasoning with?”
Jacob only laughed at her “Oh Madison, you’re so naive, that it even amuses me to think we’re related.” Suddenly the light in the room was extinguished and for a moment the room went pitch-black. Madison didn’t have time to start wondering what had happened when she felt an immense pull in her mind and her back arched with the invisible strain of it. It wasn’t painful, but felt rather like a heavy object was pressing in on her from all sides and squeezed her relentlessly. She saw little sparks of pure light exploding from her skin and a new blaze erupted, there where thin white traces between her and Jacob that sizzled and sparked like electric lines. The ornament below had dimmed and nothing moved from it towards them anymore. Jacob had closed his eyes and his hands were clenched into fists. He looked like he was concentrating hard on something. Suddenly a white mist rose before Madisons eyes and she heard Jacob in her mind again.
“Let it go sister. You can leave all your burdens behind. I will help you find peace. Let it go.”
Madison had no idea what he meant by that, but the feeling of being squished intensified. She started seeing flashes of her childhood. Her with Jacob, playing in her room. Him reading to her before bedtime. Both of them flying together. Him chasing after her with a toy-wand, laughing. The flashes sped up and her mind was once again full of Jacob. She tried hard to fight it, remembering Snapes instructions. The memory of her occlumency lesson was quickly followed by a flash of blue and Pennys eyes swam before her. The memory that had surfaced during her session with Snape, of her and Penny dancing during the Celestial ball grew clearer in her and stayed before her eyes, replacing scenes with Jacob from their childhood. She felt the pressure around her subside immediately and focused instinctively on Penny.
“What are you doing? Stop that! Remember who you are sister!” Jacobs voice was agitated and Madison felt the forces around her close in again. She squeezed her eyes shut and thought of Penny. Penny holding her at the ball. Penny shredding boomslang skins in Snapes laboratory. Penny looking at her with a smile on her face across the dinner table. Penny whispering Madisons name into her hair in the room of requirement. The images of Penny raced in her mind and suddenly, without warning she felt herself fall. She plummeted to the ground with a loud thump, hitting both of her knees painfully against the stone floor.
“Aaarghh!” the shout that Jacob gave was not only in Madisons mind, she looked up and saw him, still levitated feet above her, glowing with white light, sparks bursting all around him. His hands where full

of what seemed to be pure energy and he was trembling.
“This can not be! It needs to happen now!” he shouted. Suddenly new lines of white light formed, this time between Jacob and Silver. Madison watched open-mouthed as her fathers body rose to the air at the same height she herself had just been and seemed to be bound in a similar fashion. Jacob and Silver exchanged glances, Jacobs eyes filled with determination and Silvers with confusion and fear. Then Jacob closed his eyes again and Silver started struggling immediately. A silvery cloud that was surrounded by a torrent of little white eruptions emanated slowly from Silvers chest and moved towards Jacob. It looked like a miniature lighting storm to Madison. When it reached Jacob, he took a deep breath and raised his arms, the cloud emerging with him seamlessly. Silver crumpled to the floor next to Madison and panted heavily, looking somehow smaller than before. Jacob descended on his own, landing on his feet gracefully. He took a few quick steps towards Madison who quickly scrambled against the wall, backing away from him.
“You! You…You’re dead! You…I have to think…” he side-glanced at Silver “This will do for the moment…it’s not nothing. However…” He looked at Madison again with fury in his eyes “You are dead, you hear me. This is not the end!” Then he straightened himself and twisted on the spot. With a small popping sound, he was gone.
The room became almost completely dark. The only light came from the dimmed heart in the middle. Silver was taking deep breaths, still sitting on the floor. Madison looked around herself fearing Jacobs return. When nothing happened for several minutes, she got up slowly. Her knees were throbbing from her fall, her palm oozed blood gradually and she felt her face stinging and her ribs aching from whatever spell Silver had used. She stood hunched over, her hand covering her chest, feeling around for any undiscovered injuries.
“What happened?” she asked her father tentatively “Where did he go?” Silver didn’t answer, but got up as well and reached for his wand. Madisons muscles tensed again and she was ready to jump on Silver, but he took no notice of her and waved his wand casually. Nothing happened. He shook his head and gestured again. Still nothing. Silver looked at his wand pointedly and said out loud now “Lumos!” No light appeared. “Lumos!” he tried again with the same results. “Lumos! Auguamenti! Orchideous! Avis!” he was yelling now, waving his wand wildly with each spell. Nothing happened, he might as well have waved a pencil around his head. He turned to Madison with panic in his face and raised his wand again “Crucio!” he whispered slowly while looking straight into her eyes. Madison winced, but felt nothing. “Sectum sempra! Obliviate! Imperio!” Nothing – no light came from his wand, no spells hit Madison. With a

feeling like earth had opened under her and tried to swallow both her and her father, Madison realized what Jacob had done.
“You…he took your magic?” she whispered in terror. The realization had reached Silver at the same time as Madison. His eye twitched and for a moment he sagged. Then he lunged at Madison “Shut up! Shut up you little-” He pushed Madison hard against the wall. She hit the back of her head hard, but didn’t try to fight her father, the shock still too strong.
“That’s what he was trying to do to me? Take my magic? And now he has taken yours?” she asked, still whispering “Oh dad…”
He backhanded her across the face again and she slumped to the floor. Silver started panting and placed his hands on his knees in an effort to keep calm. It looked like he was having a panic attack. Madison didn’t try to get up, feeling too weak, still thunderstruck with the enormity of Jacobs actions. Slowly his fathers breathing calmed somewhat and he mumbled quickly “It’s ok, he needed it. He will reverse it. I just have to get to him.” It sounded like he was convincing himself in a truth he needed to believe. Madison felt immense pity towards her father at that moment. She felt sure, that Jacob wasn’t waiting to return what he had stolen, but knew better than to speak her mind at that time. She got up “Come on. Let’s get out of here.” She moved to the statue of Wilfred again and held out a hand to her father. Silver looked at her with disgust in his eyes, but took her hand. Madison grabbed the stone hand of the statue and the room around her started spinning. The only thing she saw clearly were the hate-filled eyes of her father as they traveled back to Hogwarts.

Chapter 34

Opening her eyes, Madison saw that they were back at the school. She released her hold on Wilfred the Wistful and the statue withdrew his arm with the same loud scraping noises as before and tucked it back inside his robes. Then the statue shook one last time and went completely rigid again as if having never moved at all. The only sign that something had happened were the blood stains inside the goblet he was holding.
Silver was already walking towards the courtyard hastily and Madison jogged after him, still clutching her chest which ached dully.
“Where are you going?” she asked her father. He was looking half-mad. His eyes were darting in different directions and his skin was pale while his lips frothed with him mumbling something Madison couldn’t make out.
“We have to go to Dumbledore, or to the staff room” said Madison walking beside him “You can’t leave on your own, how would you get back home? You probably can’t apparate anymore anyhow.”
Silver stopped abruptly and pushed Madison hard against the chest. She cried out, for the pain was strong and dilated from her chest all over her immediately. Her fathers spell had been strong to cause such damage. Still, she only backed away a few steps and raised her eyes to his with a pleading look “What do you think you are going to do now? You have no idea where he is and no means to find him. You need help dad.” He glanced at her briefly with a deranged look and spat “It’s always you! You always ruin everything! It was supposed to be you, not me! He didn’t mean to hurt me.” He rubbed his face with his hands and said to himself again “It will be fine, I just have to find him and then it will be fine.”
Madison surveyed him with pity and disbelief “Can’t you see what he is? Even now after what he has done to you? Do you honestly think he will reverse it? He doesn’t care-” but she didn’t manage to finish her sentence as Silver had grabbed her by the collar and started shaking her so violently, that Madison cried out loud again.
“Shut up you idiot! You know nothing about him! You’re nothing but a stupid menace. I wish you were never-” Suddenly he let go of Madison and she toppled to the ground at his feet. Thick ropes were forming out of thin air and bound Silver tightly from his mouth to his ankles. His eyes bulged, but he couldn’t say anything and stood, swaying a little, in the middle of the corridor. Madison looked around wildly and saw to her astonishment Pennys mother walking towards her quickly from across the courtyard, her hand raised high with her wand.

“Are you alright?” she asked reaching them. Madison just looked at her mutely from the floor. She reached out her hand to pull her up “Come on” she said. It was the fear mixed with kindness in her voice, that made Madison take her hand and get up.
“Everyone has been looking for you. Where were you?” asked Pennys mother surveying Madison with trepidation.
“How did you even know to look?” croaked Madison, her throat constricted.
“Someone found your classmate. The one your father bound before he placed the imperius curse on you.”
“Is Merula alright?” asked Madison anxiously.
“Yes, she’s fine, Madam Pomfrey took her to the infirmary just in case after she told Dumbledore and the staff what she had witnessed. Dumbledore asked the remaining parents to help search for you.” Someone else was running across the courtyard towards them.
“You found them! Thank Merlin! Are you alright Miss Steward?” it was Flitwick. He was panting and looked at Madison with concerned eyes. Madison remained silent, she didn’t have the willpower to explain everything, especially with her father standing next to her looking at her with such contempt that it burned. It was too much, she felt so overwhelmed that she had the weird feeling she might start laughing out loud. Or maybe crying, she wasn’t sure. Pennys mother gave her an understanding look and said briskly “Why don’t you escort Mr. Steward here to the staff room Filius. I will take Madison to the hospital wing and then inform Dumbledore.” Flitwick nodded at once and drew his wand. He levitated Silvers body in front of him and moved towards the stairs. Madison tried to catch her fathers eyes one more time, but he averted them and stared at the walls with furrowed brows.
“Come along Madison” said Pennys mother with so much tenderness that Madisons eyes widened when she looked at her. She winced slightly at her gaze, but placed her hand on Madisons back, guiding her towards the infirmary. They moved slowly, as Madison was still hunched over a little, not daring to straighten herself fully. When they reached the doors to the hospital wing, Pennys mother stopped her from entering.
“Wait a moment please” she sighed and looked into Madisons eyes “I’m sorry, but I have to say this now or it will drive me crazy.” Madison took a step back apprehensively. “I am so sorry! What I witnessed moments ago and what Merula told...I would never had thought a parent capable of...I misjudged you. I am very very sorry!” her eyes looked at Madison pleadingly. She wanted to say it was ok and move on, she was so tired and didn’t want to think about anything that had happened in the vault or after it. But Pennys

mothers blue eyes bore into her, and to her surprise, she felt a huge lump in her throat. She blinked and held her breath, but to no avail – tears started leaking from her eyes and she couldn't hold herself together any longer. Heaving a massive breath, she started crying silently, covering her face with her hand. She felt herself being pulled into a warm hug and didn't fight it. Pennys mother held her tightly and stroked her back while mumbling soothingly "I am so sorry! You poor girl. You poor brave girl." Finally, when no more tears came, Madison pulled back, feeling self-conscious, but lighter somehow. She saw the tear stains on Pennys mothers blouse "I'm sorry" she offered weakly, drying her eyes with the back of her hand. She tutted dismissively and said "Let's go now. You need sleep and peace. Madam Pomfrey will heal you and we can talk more after you feel better."
The ward was almost empty, only Merula was sitting on the bed nearest to the door. She looked at Madison with fearful eyes "Hey Steward!" she said timidly.
"Hey" answered Madison shyly "You ok?" she asked.
"Better than you for sure" replied Merula with the smallest of grins. Madison smiled faintly at her and walked on to Madam Pomfrey who was gesturing her towards her usual bed. She reflected briefly how absurd it was, that she felt homely in the infirmary bed, but then lowered herself on it gratefully, groaning slightly. Madam Pomfrey arranged screens around the bed to give them privacy. Pennys mother took Madisons hand and said gently "I have to go to Dumbledore. He wants to speak to you himself." Madison nodded at her and she continued "I will be back later. I'll tell Penny she can come and see you as soon as Madam Pomfrey and Dumbledore allow it." With a small squeeze to her hand, she left in a brisk pace. Madison sighed and leaned her head on the pillow.

Madam Pomfrey healed the cuts and bruises on her instantly. The only injuries that took time were the wound on her palm and the aching in her chest and ribs. She muttered to herself when examining Madisons palm and dabbed some cream on before bandaging it gently. "I'm afraid you'll have another scar with this one Miss Steward" she sighed. The pain in her chest was hardest to heal. Madam Pomfrey gave her seven different types of potions to drink and said that she had to keep drinking them for the next five days.
Dumbledore strode into the hospital wing shortly after Madam Pomfrey had finished tending to Madison. She had placed the dreamless sleep potion on her bedside "Drink it when you are ready dear" she said kindly and moved to her cabinet to give her and Dumbledore privacy. The headmaster sat next to Madison, looking

much older than usual, she hadn't seen him look so dejected ever before.
"Where's my father?" she asked him before he had said anything to her.
"At the teachers lounge, supervised by professors Snape and McGonagall. They are waiting for the ministry officials to come and take him away. They should arrive at any moment."
"What will happen to him?" she asked nervously.
"He will be taken to Azkaban to wait for his trial" answered Dumbledore in the same somber manner.
"Azkaban?" Madisons heart sank. She had heard the terrible tales about the wizards prison and could not even fathom Silver Steward locked up in that place.
Dumbledore raised his eyes at her "You think it too harsh a punishment?" he asked her. Madison thought for a while "If all I hear about that place is true, then I think it too hard a punishment for anyone" she answered evenly. Dumbledore looked at her for a long time and finally said in a tired voice "Are you ready to tell me what happened today?" Madison squirmed in her bed "Didn't you question my father?"
Dumbledore nodded "I did. I heard about all the horrors he inflicted upon you, but I would like to hear your side, your experience, in order to gather all the pieces of the puzzle so to speak. I am sorry, I understand it must be extremely difficult for you to relive all of this so soon. It is my opinion however, that talking about traumas like this helps with the healing process." He looked at her mildly, his fingers still crossed in his lap. Madison felt another lump in her throat and swallowed hard. She didn't want to cry in front of the headmaster for some reason. She took her time and started talking very slowly, taking deep breaths between her sentences, wincing because it hurt her chest. She managed rather well, until she reached the part of her story where she had fallen from her binds after thinking about Penny. She stopped and pressed her lips together. Dumbledore leaned back in his seat "You felt Jacobs pull lessen after you thought about Miss Haywood?" he stated. Madison nodded, blushing slightly.
"It is another proof of your heart conquering the will of your brother. Your ability to love so deeply shielded you against him tonight and saved you. Why does that trouble you?"
"Because he couldn't do it" mumbled Madison to her blanket.
"I peg your pardon?" asked Dumbledore politely. Madison took a deep breath "Because if my love for Penny helped me against Jacob, then why couldn't love help my father? Jacob overpowered him so easily – why didn't his love shield him? I know, that he didn't...he doesn't love me..." Madison had to swallow another lump and continued while

blinking her eyes “But he must love someone! My mother? Jacob surely! His love should have shielded him then, shouldn’t it have?” she looked at Dumbledore through her watery eyes.
Dumbledore nodded pensively and edged in his seat, closer to Madison. “You have to understand” he said to her very gently “There are different kinds of love. Your fathers love for Jacob is very strong indeed. So strong in fact, that that it made him do unspeakable things. His love clouded his mind so heavily, that he lost the ability to differentiate between right and wrong. Your father had high expectations for your brother and those were what he truly loved. The prophecy, his destiny – your father loved Jacob as the chosen one, not for himself. It is rather rare to be able to love someone simply for who they are.” Madison thought she understood, her father had always held Jacob to a high standard and talked about his potential. She wondered if he ever really saw his son behind the possibilities. She continued with her story, feeling a little calmer. After finishing, she looked at Dumbledore expectantly.
“Do you understand what happened? Because I don’t.”
Dumbledore hummed vaguely “It is difficult to say. I have some opinions and conjectures that might prove to be accurate in time. For example I can say with certainty, that the vaults are destroyed and none remain active in Hogwarts castle. The one where you were today is not active anymore. However – this does unfortunately not mean that our troubles are over. Your brother did not receive the power he intended from the vault. He was not successful in his attempt to draw your magic, but had to settle for your father.”
“But that must have been an upgrade for him? I mean, my father is a much more accomplished wizard and I’m still in school…” intercepted Madison.
“You are wrong. Your brother knew what you yourself have not yet discovered – you are a very powerful witch Madison. The fact that you are still young has got nothing to do with it. The vaults imbued you and Jacob with their power. It seams that it was intended to be like that from the very beginning. Your brother became aware of this at some point during his time in them. One of the two would have to draw the magic out of the other one after receiving the ability from the heart. But Jacob couldn’t defeat you and so the transition wasn’t complete. That’s why he attacked your father. Only thing is – your father had no powers from the vault so Jacob could take only his natural magic to compensate.”
“But…does that mean that I have some magic from the vault in me?” asked Madison, looking down on herself as if the power would be visible.
“That is a good question. I do not know. Do you feel different than

before? Magically I mean" asked Dumbledore.
"No. Not at all" shrugged Madison.
"Well then. We can not be sure how the magic of the vaults works. The only person who could explain it is unfortunately your brother. But going by what he said to you before leaving, I am very much afraid indeed. The ability to draw another wizards magic from them is in itself unheard of until now."
"What should I do now? Try and find him?" asked Madison from Dumbledore.
"No!" he answered loudly "You must stay as far away from him as possible. He made his intentions towards you perfectly clear just hours ago. I don't see any reason to doubt his resolve. He has been announced as a wanted wizard, half the aurors in the ministry are looking for him now. I fear very much, that he will try to finish what he started if given the opportunity."
"You mean with me? You think he wants to take my magic?" asked Madison numbly.
"Your magic...and more...Jacob is like a walking vault himself at this point. You have to be very careful until we find and capture him." Dumbledore sighed heavily and looked at his fingers again.
"There is little I can say to you to make you feel better. What you have gone through today is much too heavy a burden to carry for anyone. No child should live with the actuality of your fathers behavior. I am sorry I did not see it before and that I encouraged you to contact him. I was too eager to eliminate the threat to the school and did not see the threat right before me."
Madison looked at the headmaster in surprise "How could you have? Even I didn't think he would do something like this." They remained silent for a while and then Madison asked quietly "Professor Dumbledore? What about my mother? Did she know?"
"No. I questioned your father thoroughly and I am sure, that your mother was not involved in this plan. Silver took a hair from her for the polyjuice potion without her knowing. However I have not been in contact with her personally."
"Ok. Thanks!" said Madison, feeling a little better. After a pause, she asked him quietly, almost whispering "What now?"
"Now you rest and heal. Time will pass and you will feel better."
"I don't feel anything" admitted Madison "I should be angry, shouldn't I? Or sad? Or..."
"You will soon. Time is the greatest of healers" said Dumbledore solemnly "But don't tell Madam Pomfrey that" he added as an afterthought. "Drink your potion when you are ready and sleep, it will help, I assure you. When you get up you can see your friends. They have been frantic with worry. All of them assisted us in the search for

you before, against the orders from the teachers might I add." He got up and moved towards the door.
"Bonds we form with others of our own choosing" muttered Madison reaching for the potion. Dumbledore halted and looked back at her smiling "You will be alright Madison."

Chapter 35

Madison woke at dawn. The first sliver of sun was barely visible behind the horizon. The ward was quiet, but a light was burning in Madam Pomfreys room. Madison got to her feet gingerly. She felt better than the day before, but her chest was tender and she still couldn't straighten herself fully. She knocked on the office door and was met with a very surprised looking Madam Pomfrey. After at least a quarter of an hour of debating and pleading, she agreed to let her leave the ward with the strict demand, that she return before ten o'clock to receive her potions and to rest. She agreed willingly and walked out of the hospital wing.
She felt lucky that she woke so early. The castle was completely empty, everyone was still sleeping. She didn't want to see anyone or talk to anyone. Walking around the school she realized, that she didn't have anyplace she wanted to be either, she had just known that she wanted to get out of the infirmary. She walked around aimlessly for a long time while the sun rose behind the walls of the school. Unaware where her feet were taking her, she discovered herself standing before the statue of Wilfred the Wistful once again. She surveyed the statue carefully. Someone had cleaned her blood from the goblet and the statue looked the same as ever.
"Trying to go back?"
Madison jumped "Merula! What are you doing here?" Merula walked closer to her from the other side of the corridor.
"Could ask you the same thing. Feeling well already?"
"I'm fine" replied Madison begrudgingly. Merula jabbed a finger straight into her chest. Madisons shoulders hunched and she took a step back groaning "What the hell! Why did you do that?"
"To see how fine you are. Why did you leave the hospital wing?"
"I'll go back soon, couldn't stay there for so long. Why are you up this early?" asked Madison rubbing her ribs.
"Early bird gets the worm Steward" answered Merula offhandedly.
"What about you? Are you alright after my father…" Madisons voice faded.
"Hrrmph! I'm fine. If I had gotten my wand out before…He's an asshole by the way!" Merula said without holding back.
"Yeah, he is. I'm sorry" said Madison seriously.
"Why are you sorry? He's the asshole."
"Thank you for trying to help me. I…it meant a lot to me" said Madison looking into Merulas eyes.
"That's the problem with you Steward – every time I think we can talk normally you go and start this soft crap on me" said Merula with a

disgusted expression.
“Alright, I won’t say another word. My bad” smiled Madison.
They looked at the statue in silence for a while, when Merula said, not looking at her “So your fathers going to Azkaban?”
“How do you know already?” asked Madison puzzled.
“I fake-slept yesterday when you and Dumbledore were talking” replied Merula unabashedly.
“Oh…Yeah, he’s going to Azkaban” said Madison dully. Merula nodded and kept looking at Wilfred.
“Don’t visit” she said finally.
“Huh?”
“Don’t visit him in there. It’s worse. For him…and for you.” Madison stared at the proud witch next to her in wonder.
“Ok, I won’t. Thanks for the tip” she answered, feeling much older than her years would let on. Merula started to walk away without saying anything. Madison didn’t want her to go yet but didn’t ask her to stay either, trying not to get soft as she had put it.
“If you want to talk or whatever…I may find time sometimes…If you really need to” Merula had said this with her back turned, only tilting her head, but Madison smiled earnestly now “Thank you. And…likewise.” Merula didn’t answer, but Madison saw her smile slightly before walking away.

Madison trudged back to the infirmary at precisely ten o’clock. When she opened the door, she saw that the ward was full of people and they were all speaking at the same time. Madam Pomfreys voice was the loudest of all “I have told you – this is not a prison, my patients can come and go as they please. She’s due back any moment now. So all of you should just – There she is now!” Everyone turned and looked at Madison standing hesitantly at the doorway. As one, they rushed to her – Bill, Charlie, Tulip, Tonks, Rowan with her mother, Barnaby, Ben and Beatrice. They all hugged her and talked to her at the same time so she didn’t understand one word of it all. Feeling dazed and sore, her eyes landed on the only three people not crowding her, standing a few feet back – Penny with her mother and father. They were watching her silently, her parents exchanging worried glances among themselves. Madisons eyes found Pennys. Her blue eyes were bloodshot and she looked like she had cried recently, but no tears were on her face now. She stared back at her silently. Finally Madam Pomfreys voice bellowed over them all once again “This is the hospital wing people! No more than three visitors at a time please. Miss Steward needs to drink her potions now and rest for at least an hour after.” Everyone started saying bye to Madison at the same time and she tore her eyes from Pennys to wave to the others,

mumbling her thanks and forcing a small smile at them. When the door closed, only the three Haywoods remained standing with Madison.
Suddenly Madison felt like an alien, she had no idea what to do or how to behave. She moved to her bed awkwardly and started gulping down the potions Madam Pomfrey was handing her. When she had drunk all seven of them, she pushed her down unto the bed rather forcefully, and pulling a blanket over her, ordered her to lay still. When she had moved back to her office, Pennys mother came to Madisons bedside and adjusted her blanket.
“How are you feeling?” she asked, in a would-be-calm voice. Madison had the same urge to start laughing she had when she had last seen her the day before. As she remembered, the last time the urge had resulted in her bawling her eyes out on her shoulder, so she swallowed preemptively and answered in a hoarse voice “I’m fine, thank you.” Penny inched closer to her bed but didn’t say anything, still keeping her eyes on her face. She looked back at her and saw fear in them. This made the threat of tears more urgent than ever and she looked away quickly, trying to think of anything that could stop her from crying again. Nothing came to mind.
Pennys father moved to stand next to his wife and spoke in a soft voice “I know this is maybe not the best time, but I wanted to make sure you know this – we had a long talk with Dumbledore last night and he filled us in on what happened to you yesterday…and before that. I owe you an apology Madison. My wife and I…we acted out of fear and worry for our daughter and it blinded us. I’m sorry, I hope you can forgive us?” he finished his speech on a questioning note, looking expectantly at her. Madison felt so heavy, that she thought that she would soon fall through the hospital bed. She offered a half-nod, half-shrug to Pennys father and averted her eyes.
“You were not wrong” she whispered almost inaudibly. All the Haywoods seemed to hold their breaths at this. Feeling like she had to get through this, she forced herself to speak more loudly.
“I’m not safe for Penny. You were right.” Pennys eyes filled with fresh tears, but she still didn’t say anything. Madison couldn’t bear to see her like this and kept her own eyes on the blanket.
“My brother is still out there and he is after me. You should keep away until he’s captured…or dead.” Saying out loud the thought that had secretly haunted her since the moment Jacob had vanished from the vault made her feel like a thundering alarm had sounded in her brain – her palms started sweating slightly and her neck turned stiff. She pressed on, still avoiding looking up “You are the smartest witch I know Penny, and your parents are right – you should think about your future…about potions and your lessons. I’m…I’m not…” she couldn’t

finish, her voice got too hoarse and she felt a tear roll over her cheek. She swiped it away, angry with herself and with everyone else for some reason.
Penny took her hand cautiously and Madison cursed herself for being too weak to pull it away. Pennys mother looked like she too was about to cry, but she coughed slightly and said in a matter-of-fact voice “We know about your brother. We have already discussed the options with Dumbledore. We are leaning towards the Fidelius charm for spring break when you come to visit.” Madison looked up at them sharply “When I…What?”
Pennys father piped in “It is your choice of course, but Dumbledore approves and we would love to have you.”
Madison shook her head grimly “You can’t…I won’t.”
“Sleep on it before you decide” said Pennys mother in a calm voice “Come on Mark, we should go and find Beatrice.” She placed a hand on Madisons arm and after squeezing it gently she and her husband left the room.

Penny sat down next to Madisons bed, not letting go of her hand. Her thumb was drawing small circles inside her palm and Madison reflected fleetingly how fortunate it was that she was on her right side, because her left hand was wrapped in bandages. She didn’t raise her eyes but kept them firmly downcast, lacking the strength to even try to appear resolute, though she knew she should make an effort. Trying to convey her meaning, relying only on speech, she pushed her hair from her eyes with her bandaged hand and, feeling the weight of her words, struggled to push out the right ones.
“Listen…I need you to understand. I never wanted this. I can promise you this much. But had I known beforehand, I would never have…” She didn’t know what to say. Would she have never kissed her? Never asked her out? Never loved her? All of the choices seemed impossible, lingering like nightmares at the corners of her imagination. All she knew was that she had never meant for Penny to be in danger.
“I don’t want this for you. Your parents were right, I’m not…I’m not good for you.” She finished quickly because she felt like she had no air left in her lungs. She knew she owed her more than that, but it was too much so she just stayed quiet.
Penny stopped moving her thumb over her palm and instead grabbed her hand with both of hers and moved closer.
“Do you really think I will let you do this? I know what you are thinking and I need you to stop now. I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you about my parents initial reaction, but…I thought they would change their minds when they met you and saw what I see…I was stupid, it was easier to ignore them and stay in our own little world…with

you…I'm sorry for that. But…you can't mean what I think you are trying to say…you just can't!" Penny looked at her with such desperation, that Madisons heart gave a huge painful jerk in her chest.
"It's not just your parents Penny. You know what happened yesterday – my brother is dangerous and he is after me, I can't let you-"
"Let me what? Are you going to isolate yourself from everyone who cares for you until your brother is captured? Listen to me – I'm not going to let you do that. None of your friends will either. So you can just stop trying. My parents talked with Dumbledore, they have a plan. We can do this, we can help you. Please let us…let me…help."
New tears formed in her eyes, but she payed them no attention, instead doubling her grip on Madisons hand like it was her last lifeline.
"I'm so sorry" said Madison weakly "I never wanted you to have to-"
"Shut up!" whispered Penny weakly, a sob escaping her "I told you to stop apologizing for things that are not your fault, didn't I?" The recollection of the last time she had heard Penny say that filled Madison and she closed her eyes almost wistfully, it was such a relief to drown into the memory. Penny continued "I'm the one who is sorry. I should have told you about my parents, but…I was scared. You were so wonderful, I felt like I was on a cloud whenever we were together and I didn't want you to worry about them. I'm sorry…"
Silence fell between them. Madison swallowed and ran her bandaged hand across her face to clear her mind, forcing herself to stay in the present.
"So will you?" asked Penny in a trembling voice.
"Will I what?" asked Madison.
"Forgive me? And let me help you?" There was so much fragility in Pennys voice, that Madison felt her heart brake in a completely different way from all the ways it had already during the last days.
"There is nothing to forgive. I understand why you didn't tell your parents. It's alright" she said numbly, staring at nothing. Penny didn't seam at all reassured by her answer. She moved closer than before and put her hand on Madisons cheek and turned her head gently to face her own.
"What about helping you?" she asked seriously. The sparkling blue in her eyes, that had so recently been the only barrier between her and Jacob, flicked a switch in Madison and the last self-control she possessed dissolved. She was so tired, exhaustion looming over her, pressing on the edges of her mind, threatening to pull down the shaking fortifications she had constructed. Tears started flowing freely from her eyes as she looked at Penny.
"I think I'm too far gone" she whispered. She knew she was weak, she always had been. She thought she might have been able to hold

herself together with anyone else except with Penny. She had never been able to preserve control with her, the affection radiating from her eyes dismantled every blockade she had, leaving her open and defenseless. Penny got up and climbed carefully on the bed and placed her arms around her. She didn't say anything, but snuggled close to Madison and stroked her arm slowly. She cried quietly in Pennys arms for a long time. She didn't remember ever being held like that before, the contrast between Pennys warm and caring hands and her aching chest was so violent, that at first, she almost didn't want her touching her, fearing that the darkness in her would spread somehow. But slowly, as minutes passed, the warmth from Penny started ebbing into Madison and the aching inside her dulled. It was probably Madam Pomfreys potions working, but Madison felt sure, that it was Penny, inadvertently saving her again.
The light changed slowly behind the window and Madisons tears dried. She played with Pennys fingers absentmindedly and finally dared to look up at her face. "Do you want to go get something to eat? I'm starving?" she asked her timidly. For a split second Penny looked like she might burst into tears again, but it vanished a moment later and her face broke out into a smile "Yeah! Let's go!"

Chapter 36

The next days blurred together, losing their beginnings and ends in Madisons mind. Pennys parents had left, reminding Madison that the offer to come and stay with them was an open one. She thanked them, but didn't say anything else, still feeling rather shy and wary around them.
She took her potions under the watchful eye of Madam Pomfrey and went to most of her classes, skipping the more strenuous ones like care for magical creatures and flying. During her free periods, she slept. She still felt tired all the time, so she slept for hours, even during the day, waking up feeling like only minutes had passed. Madison soon discovered, that little moments during the day slipped by her in a matter of seconds, while others stretched for hours on end. She found herself being prodded or nudged constantly by her friends, who were trying to bring her focus back to the conversation or the task at hand. Often Madison discovered herself reading a book with no recollection when she had last turned a page or what the book was about. Sometimes she commented on something during the usual banter with her friends, only to discover that her voice sounded hoarse and all of her friends looked taken aback, like she hadn't spoken for days. Most of the teachers didn't call on her, with the exception of Snape and McGonagall and Madison sat in her classrooms, staring out the window. Ben, Rowan, Tulip, Charlie and Tonks hovered around her, forming a cloud of chatter, jokes and little acts of solidarity, constantly pushing her to stay alert. They succeeded most of the time and Madison remembered to smile at them, a little mechanically, but with no less affection as she gathered her strength to concentrate on anything.
Penny was absent only during the lessons they didn't share and her prefect duties. They ate all their meals together, more than often joined by the others. She spent every night with Madison in the Gryffindor tower, curling up in her bed, sometimes holding Madison, other times pulling Madisons arms around herself. She didn't prod Madison or try to get her to talk, but when she saw her staring at the distance with an empty look in her eyes, she passed by her and kissed her gently or ran her hand through her hair.
Days passed and with each one Madison felt the edges around her world clearing. Time started to regain its meaning and hours and minutes didn't amount to the same thing anymore. Madam Pomfrey had managed to clear away the pain in her chest and now the only physical reminder of her time in the last cursed vault was the scar in her palm. It had healed, but was still fresh and pink, the tissue a little

raised to her touch. She had formed a habit of running her fingers over the scar. It had started as an exercise Madam Pomfrey had recommended to keep the muscles in her fingers nimble, but the movement had stayed with her.

Spring was showing her different colors as the winds howled around the castle and the dampness outside clung to students robes and hair. Hagrid was moving around the grounds wrapped in a tent-like raincoat with Fang beside him jumping over puddles and almost every fireplace inside the castle was lit as often as during the frosty winter. The students stayed inside where it was warm and dry and only ventured outside for classes like herbology and care for magical creatures. Charlie had to almost drag his quidditch team to practices and watching them return, covered in mud and shivering, Madison felt rather glad that she had no such obligation.
One particularly rainy day found Madison having lunch with Penny, Tulip, Tonks and Rowan at the great hall. Tonks had brought back a bag full of products from Honeydukes during her last weekend visit to Hogsmeade and different kinds of sweets were scattered around the table in front of them, everyone nibbling on them in between their regular meal and chatter.
Charlie sank into the seat next to Madison, after returning from the field, his freckles seemingly multiplied by the little flecks of mud on his face, and sighed heavily.
“Bloody hell, this is becoming annoying. I had to actually threaten Chester with expulsion from the team to get him to the field today.”
“Can you blame him? The weather is horrid” shuddered Rowan looking up at the magical ceiling.
“What about our next match?” asked Charlie throwing up his arms “we have to practice to be able to beat Slytherin! They have an excellent team this year and they beat Hufflepuff last match.”
“Calm down, you've been on the field more than any other house team, you'll be fine” said Penny consolingly.
“What's Chesters problem anyway? Playing in the rain is always more fun, adds a certain element to the game I think” intercepted Tonks.
“He says he doesn't like the mud on his robes” shrugged Charlie angrily.
“And that's coming from the same guy who was willing to attach stink pellets to a boomerang?” wondered Tulip while refilling her goblet.
“I know” said Charlie exasperatedly “he's impossible, and mind you, the others are not much better. I have half a mind to jinx the lot of them! Bloody idiots!” he crossed his arms over his chest and looked murderously at the other team members across the room, who had turned up for lunch and were glancing at Charlie fearfully.

“Have some pumpkin juice and chill” said Tonks in a calming voice, passing Charlie a goblet. He took a hard swig from it and sputtered instantly, spilling most of the juice on the table. He looked around them all and hiccuped suddenly. Coughing out a small flash of fire, not bigger than the flame from a matchstick, his ears started to blow out huge gusts of steam. It all ended in a matter of seconds, but by that time everyone around him had burst out laughing.
“Tonks!” yelled Charlie accusingly “you put a peppermint imp in my juice!”
“No I didn't” wheezed Tonks in between spurts of giggles.
“You think I can breathe fire on my own? I felt it when I swallowed” said Charlie, scanning Tulip and Tonks, looking for someone to blame.
“You looked like you needed something to help you blow off some steam” interjected Madison while sipping her tea calmly. Everyone stopped laughing and looked at Madison in silence. She stared back at them, starting to feel self-conscious all of a sudden.
“Blow off some steam...” repeated Tonks, the corners of her mouth twitching. Like a curtain lifting, the invisible tension disappeared and as one, everyone started laughing again, even Charlie. He bumped his shoulder to Madisons “Brutus!” and got up “You're right guys, I better go and talk to the team.” They saw him approach the scared looking quidditch players and sit down with them.
They were still snickering when Madison heard a terse cough behind her. Professor McGonagall stood near their table looking at them with a stern glance.
“Miss Steward, the headmaster would like to talk with you in his office.” Madisons shoulders sagged – it wasn't Dumbledores fault, but she had started to associate visits to his office with disastrous news and felt that no good could come from another appointment. Penny obviously thought something similar as she clutched Madisons hand nervously when she made to get up. Professor McGonagall observed this and added “Yes, you better go along too Miss Haywood.” Both Madison and Penny raised their eyebrows at that, along with their friends, who exchanged surprised glances. “Today if you please” said McGonagall impatiently, tapping her foot.
They walked the corridors in silence, Madison knowing from experience that McGonagall would relinquish no information if asked about the meeting. Penny was frowning and looked worried. Madison squeezed her hand and gave her a reassuring smile, sneaking a quick peck behind McGonagall. Penny blushed a little, looking at the straight back of the transfiguration professor before them, but looked calmer and happier than before. McGonagall deposited them in front of the gargoyle after uttering the password, and they rose with the stairs to stand before the heavy door.

Dumbledore beckoned them in with his usual smile. Two comfortable looking chairs were standing before his desk this time and Madison figured, that it must not have been a last minute decision to ask Penny to join them.
Dumbledore conjured a pot of tea with cups and leaned back while the tea was steeping. Madisons foot was bouncing and Penny placed her hand on her knee to calm her. She smiled at her gratefully and for once, started the conversation with Dumbledore first.
“What has happened this time professor?”
Dumbledore smiled almost sadly “I really must invite you to tea more often, if only to clear my name as the harbinger of bad news.” He sat a little straighter and continued “However – I do have news to pass on and unfortunately they are not the sort one would wish to hear, or to disclose to others. There has been an attack on a wizard near London. The ministry believes your brother to be responsible and I must sadly concur with them.”
Madison exhaled, she had been preparing for something like this. Jacob wasn't someone who would stay in the shadows for long.
“Is the wizard alright?” she asked.
Dumbledore coughed “Yes and no. He is alright in the sense that he is alive and not injured physically, but he is in a similar state as your father, he is drained of his magic.”
Madisons eyes widened “He can do that? I thought it was only possible in the vault or with members of my family.”
“Apparently not. Had we known for sure that Jacob retained this power...well...I must warn you that this is not public knowledge, the ministry is keeping the press out of it. You can imagine the panic that would follow when it got out, that there was someone with that kind of power moving freely among us all.”
“Who was it?” asked Penny weakly.
“Malcolm Rook. Not a name you recognize I dare say. It might be of interest to us however, that according to my sources he is an active member in the League of Seven.”
“A member of the league? But then...why? They are on the same side, aren’t they?” asked Madison in confusion.
“Sides change quickly during hard times” remarked Dumbledore dryly “I think that the members of the league sought out your brother or, more plausible perhaps, he found them. They must not have agreed on how to advance or maybe Jacob merely wanted to test his newfound powers, that I do not know...Either way – Mr Rook is currently in St. Mungo’s, though I must admit the healers have no encouraging prospects for him. As with your father” he added solemnly. “They are both, at this moment, not distinguishable from wizards born as squibs.”

“Are the aurors still looking for him?” asked Madison, desperate for some kind of action.
“They are. But it is very hard to track down a powerful wizard who does not want to be found. At least now they are forewarned of his abilities” sighed Dumbledore. “As are we” he continued, looking seriously at Madison “I’m afraid that since there is every reason to believe that you Madison are his main target, we have to take some precautions. I must, with a heavy heart, forbid you to enter Hogsmeade during the weekends. And – “he pressed on, a bit louder as Madison looked like she was about to protest “And – urge you to not wander the grounds alone and not to go flying further than the bounds of the quidditch pitch allow.” He smiled wistfully at the exasperated look on Madisons face “I know that it is unfair, I do not deny it, however there is nothing else we can do at the moment.”
Dumbledore straightened a little and went on in a more energetic tone “There is a matter of the upcoming spring break. Your parents Miss Haywood -” he nodded at Penny “have asked me to allow you to stay with them for the duration.” He raised his hand as a gesture for patience to Madison, who had almost stood from her seat trying to argue.
“I see no reason to deny their request. Philomena is a very capable witch, having worked for the ministry herself some years ago, and their house is an unknown entity for Jacob. In addition, her connections make your commute to the ministry rather convenient.”
“My commute? Why should I go to the ministry?” asked Madison perplexed.
“The date for your fathers trial has been set and it falls in the middle of spring brake. Your presence is unfortunately needed, as your testimony is the most important piece of evidence the ministry has.”
“I have to testify?” exclaimed Madison, fear seeping into her from all corners. Penny took her hand in a soothing gesture as Dumbledore continued.
“I’m afraid so. I myself will be present and will provide counsel if needed. It should be a matter of simply relying the events as they happened.”
Trickles of fear and uneasiness ran up and down Madisons spine as she imagined herself reliving the day in the vault.
“It won’t take more than an hour. The legal proceedings require it, there is no way around it I’m afraid. I assure you, I tried to persuade persons involved to try and spare you” added Dumbledore looking at Madison intently.
“No…It’s ok, I’ll go, of course…Thank you though!” agreed Madison, bracing herself.
“Getting back to the matter at hand. We have already discussed

protective charms and in addition to more common spells, I have agreed to be the secret keeper for the Fidelius charm upon your house." Dumbledore looked at Penny again, smiling encouragingly.
"Madison, please" said Penny, pulling her back in her seat "Can't you see that it is the best possible solution? Jacob has no idea where I live, he doesn't even know me. And it's almost two weeks we could spend together. I could show you all the places I have talked about. Please come? For me?"
Madison slumped to her seat, feeling ambushed. The reason Dumbledore had invited Penny to this meeting became obvious. She sighed and flexed her fingers nervously inside her scarred palm.
"I don't know Penny...What if he finds out where we are? What if he uses legilimency again? What if he-" Dumbledore intercepted "That is partly the reason we will be using the Fidelius charm. You see, even if Jacob contacts you, he won't be able to discover your location, not unless the secret keeper – that being myself – divulges that information to him willingly. I'm quite confident in assuming that Jacob will expect that you will stay in Hogwarts for the holiday."
"You see? It would be safer for you to come with me. And..." Penny glanced at Dumbledore quickly, blushing "...I can't be away from you for so long. I wouldn't be able to sleep or think or...So if you won't come, then I'm staying here with you! And that's not negotiable!" she finished resolutely, staring at Madison with defiance.
Dumbledore, who had been staring at the ceiling during Pennys speech, spoke softly "If I may add another point to an already compelling argument – there is the added bonus of forgiveness to your possible journey. The last time we spoke, the Haywoods voiced some concerns in regards to your first meeting with them. I believe that they are rather eager to mend the effect and have a fresh start, so to speak. Don't you think that they deserve the chance?"
Madison felt her arguments slipping through her fingers. Dumbledore and Penny had done a thorough job at decimating all the angles she would have refused them from. The only one left was the jagged doubt at the pit of her stomach. But when she laid her eyes on Penny, looking so hopeful and pleading, she felt the familiar weakness in her rise and smooth the scratches. How could she ever say no to her? So she didn't say anything, but simply nodded. The smile that broke out on Pennys face was like a palm for her aching conscience and her obvious happiness engulfed her, smothering the fear in her heart.
"Good! I am glad!" said Dumbledore, obviously happy the matter had been resolved. "It is best to keep your shield close" he added, winking at Madison. She blushed at his remark and Penny looked quizzically at them.
"One more thing professor" said Madison quickly "do you know

anything about my mother?" Dumbledores smile vanished
"Regrettably no. I have tried of course, but it seams, that she is choosing to be elusive. I should note, that the ministry is looking for her as well. Her connection to your brother and father makes her a person of interest at the very least, not to mention, that there is still the possibility that she is a member of the very order your brother has recently attacked."
Madison nodded again, she had not been expecting anything else. Her mother knew how to disappear if she so wanted.
"You will be traveling with the aid of a portkey, it is safer this way. Professor McGonagall will give you further instructions on the specifics."
"You have it all planned out already?" asked Madison smiling with a raised eyebrow.
Dumbledore didn't look remotely abashed "Not at all, I simply prefer to be well prepared for all outcomes. Be they the ones I had hoped for or not."

Chapter 37

Madison fell on her knees, but steadied herself with her right arm and felt sand between her fingers. She opened her eyes and saw that she was on a beach. She and Penny had taken a portkey from professor McGonagalls office just seconds ago but Madison had never felt further from Hogwarts than she did at that moment. As far as her eyes could see, there lay the ocean, never-ending, constant and always moving. She was not surprised, Penny had filled her in about her home in as much detail as it was possible. It was windy and Madisons hair kept falling in her eyes. She desperately needed a haircut, her hair was exceeding its usual length by far. She shivered and got to her feet. The wind was brisk and carried drops of water with it from the clouded ocean. Madison looked at Penny and grasped her backpack more securely, her nerves starting to surface again.
During the past days at Hogwarts, Penny had talked of nothing else but their visit to her childhood home and all the places they could go and all the things she wanted to show Madison, to share with her. It was clear, that this trip meant a lot to her. Very aware of this, Madison tried her best to hide her apprehension and the jitters she felt, which rolled in the more frequently, the closer the first day of the vacation came. Penny beamed at her and wiped the sand off from her pants.
“Come on. It’s a few minutes walk that way.”
They strolled hand-in-hand further from the sea. Madison could see a settlement near the beach line but they walked away from that too, crossing a moor on their way to a large house that stood well away from the others. Penny was almost shaking with excitement beside her, Madison gave her a sidelong glance and smiled, her happiness made Madison calmer and she needed to see it in order to assure to herself, that she had made the right choice in coming.
A tall figure was walking to meet them from the house. It was Pennys mother, Philomena. When they met, she hugged Penny affectionately while watching Madison from over her daughters shoulder. When their hug ended, she made a movement like she thought to hug Madison too, but had reconsidered. She was glad – still testing her standing with Pennys parents, trying to find the middle ground between a cursed villain and someone to be pitied, she preferred to keep her distance.
She nodded to Philomena and smiled tentatively “Hello! Thank you again for inviting me to stay.”
“Of course, we are very happy you decided to accept our invitation.”
There was a slight awkward pause during which Penny grabbed

Madisons hand again and pulled her nearer “Where’s dad?”
Obviously relieved to have something to talk about, Philomena gestured them towards the house and said “He went to Kings Cross to get Beatrice. Dumbledore thought it would be too suspicious if both of you were absent from the train. They should be back soon.”
They walked up to the house with Penny gleefully pointing out different places of interest or memories to Madison. The house was beautiful and huge, the gardens around it were full of flowerbeds and trees of all kinds. Philomena explained, that since both she and Penny were interested in potions, they had planted many useful species that were common and widely used for ingredients.
“And as a result our garden has grown to be a little…unorthodox. Mark tries to restrain it from time to time, but since every plant has its own needs and specific trimming necessities…Well he gave up after last time, when he tried to cut back the bouncing bulbs and they jumped on him.”
“It’s perfect” smiled Madison looking around “It looks like an actual garden should look like.” She remembered her parents garden with the trimmed grass and ominous looking statues instead of flowers and knew there was no comparison – Pennys garden won by a landslide.

The house smelled of lilacs, there were many windows and the prominent feeling was that of lightness and welcoming. It was tastefully decorated with comfy rugs and pillows strewn about, small candles and family pictures on shelves and a fire crackling in the fireplace. Madison smiled to herself – the house felt like Penny to her, it even smelled like her.
“You have a beautiful home Mrs Haywood” she said politely when she was ushered to the kitchen for tea. Both Penny and her mother looked at her.
“Please call me Philomena dear” said Pennys mother with a hint of sadness in her voice.
“Alright” nodded Madison. Penny smiled at her encouragingly and ran upstairs to put her bag away.
“So – how do you take your tea dear?” asked Philomena bustling around the cupboards “With or without milk?”
“With milk please” answered Madison and observing Philomena added quietly “Penny prefers lemon to milk.”
“Does she really?” questioned Philomena and Madison nodded timidly, feeling like she was teetering on some sort of an invisible line. Pennys mother didn’t say anything else however and placed cups on the table between them. Penny returned and they chatted for a while about school and the coming exams. Madison stayed quiet for most of it, glancing outside the window at the ocean. Suddenly the door burst

open and Beatrice bounded inside, followed by her father.
“Hi mom!” shouted the youngest Haywood enthusiastically and hugged her mother forcefully.
“Hey kid!” said Mark and ruffled Pennys hair affectionately.
“Daaad!” whined Penny and ducked away from his hand, but hugged him quickly.
“Hello Madison!” said Mark and Madison jerked slightly. She had been deep in thought and coughed to cover her confusion “Hi.”
“Got here alright?” asked Pennys father.
“Yes, the portkey worked perfectly, we arrived at the beach about an hour ago” supplied Penny when Madison didn’t say anything.
“Have you settled into your rooms already?” asked Mark while taking a mug for himself from the shelf.
“Not yet, we decided to have a cup first” replied Philomena.
“What do you mean rooms?” asked Penny with furrowed brows
“We’re both staying in my room.”
Mark and Philomena exchanged glances.
“Don’t you think it would be better to…So both of you could have their privacy and-” started Philomena weakly, blushing slightly.
Madison looked at her feet, this was not at all the kind of conversation she wanted to have with Pennys parents.
“Oh mom! Don’t be ridiculous! Of course we’re staying in the same room. She’s my girlfriend” rebutted Penny in annoyance.
“Yes, but you are still underage and...and...Mark?” Philomena looked at her husband with a pleading expression, trying to find support.
Pennys father smiled and looked at Penny kindly “You are growing up so fast honey. Could you maybe oblige us this much and leave us our last sense of control we as parents are clinging to?”
“What’s the point, they are shacking up every night at Hogwarts anyway” snickered Beatrice.
Madison covered her face with her hand and mumbled “Thank you Beatrice!” while fidgeting in her seat. “It’s ok Penny. I’ll stay in another room” she added, eager to stop talking about the matter.
“Alright then, that’s settled!” said Mark hastily “Did anyone give you a tour of the house already?” he asked, obviously trying to change the subject. Penny looked like she was about to argue and Madison squeezed her hand under the table “It’s alright, really” she whispered to her and then followed her father to see the house.

The evening passed pleasantly. They ate together and after the meal drank tea around the fireplace. Beatrice couldn’t stay still for long and ran around the house like an eager puppy, sometimes bringing back some book or toy to show to Madison. Mark and Philomena were sitting on a sofa, leaning into each other with a comforter thrown over

their feet, looking very cozy. They made an earnest effort to get to know Madison who in return did her best to answer all of their questions and leave a good impression.
“Do you have a favorite subject Madison?” asked Mark sipping his tea.
“Not really. I like most of them. Well maybe not divination...” replied Madison. Philomena scoffed “You’re not missing out on anything, useless field in my opinion.”
“Yeah, I’m not a fan either” smiled Madison “But I don’t have one particular favorite like Penny does with potions.”
“I do hope you’re not limiting yourself to only one field already honey?” asked Mark now from Penny.
“Nonsense dear! If one has an affinity for something, they should follow their passion” quipped Philomena.
“Well she’s definitely got an affinity for potions. Professor Snape gave her permission to use his personal laboratory. He has never done this before for any other student” said Madison proudly looking at Penny who was smiling slightly, looking pleased.
“Well-well, that is something. Nice going honey!” said Mark.
“Madison likes history but Binns is an awful teacher so she just reads about it on her own. And she’s excellent on a broom, you should see her fly dad!” boasted Penny readily. It was Madisons turn to shrink now, gripping her teacup firmly, she took a long swig to cover her embarrassment, almost burning her tongue.
“Really? Maybe you could show me tomorrow in the garden then? I’ve wanted to have a go at it for years, but as luck have it, both my wife and daughter hate flying” said Mark eagerly, leaning toward Madison.
“Sure, I’d be happy to” smiled Madison.
“Just be careful alright? Balancing on these little wooden sticks...with all the magic we possess, not to mention muggle travel...seams hazardous” fretted Philomena.
“Can I try?” asked Beatrice hopefully.
“No!” said her parents in unison. “Not before you have completed at least a years worth of lessons in school” added Philomena.
Soon they all started yawning one by one and decided to call it a night. They trudged upstairs and Madison heaved her backpack to the guest room. Penny was looking increasingly disappointed and Madison kissed her cheek trying to comfort the blonde.
“It’s alright, it’s not like I’m going anywhere, I’m right next door. I’ll see you in the morning.” Penny nodded, but didn’t look at all pleased with the outcome. Madison brushed her teeth and said goodnight, closing the door to her room. It was small, but rather snug. The bed was much larger than the one she had in Hogwarts and she climbed in, feeling the weight of the day in her bones.
It had been a bizarre day to say the least. Madison had rarely felt so

out of place and equally at home at the same time. Pulling the blanket up to her chin, she tried to fall asleep, but felt that though tired, something was missing. She turned on the bed and wiggled around to find a comfortable position. It didn't help and she laid on her back, staring up at the dark ceiling, hoping that sleep would arrive eventually. Minutes passed and Madison was just as awake as before. Suddenly she heard a floorboard creek behind her door and then someone moving. Slowly her door opened and closed again quickly.
"Madison?" a small tentative whisper.
"Penny? What are you doing here? Are you alright?" Madison rose to a sitting position, worried about the sudden presence of her girlfriend. Penny climbed into her bed and pulled Madison close to her.
"I couldn't sleep" she said softly "I kept thinking about you alone in here and me over there. And I missed you. Its so stupid to be sleeping separately when we are so close to each other. We don't even do that in Hogwarts anymore and there we have much more reason to than here. Not that I can't, just...why should we? So I decided to come. I don't care what my parents will say, I'll talk to them tomorrow, they are just not used to someone...I mean I haven't brought anyone home with me before so they aren't used to dealing with...Never mind, I'm going to talk to them about it and-"
Madison pressed her lips to Pennys firmly to stop her from rambling "I missed you too. And I couldn't sleep either." Penny sighed into the kiss and pressed her body closer to Madisons.
"Really?" for some reason, she sounded relieved.
"Of course! You've spoiled me, I'm doomed now to sleepless nights whenever you are missing from my bed" teased Madison gently.
"As it should be!" laughed Penny while brushing her hand through Madisons hair.
"But your parents?" Madison raised an eyebrow at her.
"Never mind them, they will just have to accept this. We're both almost of age" said Penny offhandedly, more interested in Madisons neck now, placing small kisses along it.
"True, but I would prefer them not to discover me ravishing their first-born on the first night of my first visit after we promised them we would sleep in different rooms" explained Madison while gently pushing Penny away from herself. She groaned grumpily, but stopped kissing Madison and instead draped her arms around her, snuggling into her side.
"Fine! I'll talk to them first thing tomorrow" she huffed.
"There's a perfect discussion to have during breakfast. Hey mom, dad – my cursed girlfriend and I can't sleep without each other so we'll be staying in one room so we can shag whenever we like it, alright?"
Penny didn't laugh, she raised herself up on her elbow to look at

Madison.
“You’re not cursed. And I really don't want to sleep without you” she said seriously.
Madison regretted her harsh words immediately. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sound so...Sorry” she said sheepishly, running her hand over Pennys cheek apologetically.
“It’s ok” said Penny, laying down again “And I do want the option to shag whenever by the way” she added soundly after a small pause.
“Understood” nodded Madison smiling.
The warmth from Pennys body, the smell of her shampoo in the air and her arms around Madisons chest, appeared to be what had been missing before, because sleep finally arrived.

Chapter 38

Madison woke at dawn. Penny was sleeping with her back pressed into Madisons chest, hugging her arm with both of hers. Madison smiled at the sight and gently pulled her arm free. Penny mumbled something incoherent, but didn't wake. Very carefully, Madison backed away from her and after adjusting the blanket around her, she stood and stretched. She decided to go hunt for coffee and maybe have a quiet moment watching the sun rise over the ocean.
Reemerging from the bathroom, fully clothed and feeling fresh, she descended downstairs to the kitchen. To her surprise, there was someone already sitting in the shadowy room at the counter with a steaming mug in her hands.
"I'm so sorry! I didn't realize you would be up already, I didn't mean to disturb you" gasped Madison and backed away a little.
"Nonsense! Come, join me please!" said Philomena waving her over.
Madison edged a little closer, but didn't sit yet.
"I don't want to disturb you" she said again timidly. Her experience with her own parents had taught her the importance of giving space to people.
"You're not, I promise you. I would love some company" said Pennys mother and pulled out a chair for her. Madison was strongly reminded of the moment she had offered her hand to pull her up from the floor at her fathers feet – she had the same kindness, mixed with fear in her voice now. Wondering briefly what she was afraid of, Madison accepted her offer and sat down.
"Coffee?" asked Philomena briskly.
"Yes please" nodded Madison eagerly and accepted the large mug handed to her gratefully.
They sat side by side in the dusky kitchen, watching the sun rise slowly outside the extensive window.
"You have the best view from here" observed Madison.
"Indeed. Drinking my morning coffee here is one of my favorite rituals. Only shame is that the rest of my family never wake so early, so I'm usually alone."
"I wouldn't care" said Madison gazing at the pink echoing from the horizon. Then, realizing what she had just said, she reddened instantly "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that. I just...It's just so very peaceful isn't it?"
Philomena gave her an appraising look "Actually you're right. It is a rather meditative time I suppose."
They sat in silence and drank their coffees. Madison kept her eyes on the rising sun, enjoying the quiet way light became prevalent in the

house, her mind blissfully empty.
“So. Penny came to your room yesterday.”
It wasn’t a question, but a quiet statement. Madison choked on her coffee and spent at least a full minute coughing before she could answer.
“She did yes” she forced out as soon as she could breathe normally again. Philomena smiled, the light of the new sun reflected in her blue eyes.
“I should have known. Penny has always been rather headstrong. If she sets her mind on something, it becomes almost impossible to sway her. Takes after her father.” Madison chuckled, though she felt a little nervous. Deciding it was best to try and talk openly with her girlfriends mother, she placed her mug down and looked at Philomena.
“I don’t want to be disrespectful or seam impudent, but Beatrice was right yesterday – we are sharing a bed at Hogwarts, have been for months actually. So there really is no reason to-”
“You like Penny a lot don’t you?” interrupted Philomena, not looking at Madison.
“I love her” stated Madison simply. The older woman raised her eyes to face her “Love? I hope you don’t use that expression lightly.”
“I don’t, believe me” muttered Madison looking at her cup.
Philomena shook her head and winced “Of course you don’t. I’m sorry.” They stayed silent again for a while and Madison was starting to feel insecure, like she had said the wrong thing or stepped over some sort of a line unknowingly. Just as she was about to say something, Philomena beat her to it and said “You know I’ve never seen such a vivid contrast between two people as I did when I found you with your father that day.” Madison only looked at her silently, her eyes wide. She hadn’t thought that Pennys mother would bring up that day in their discussion, the topic had been successfully avoided so far.
“You looked so fragile, so beaten down. You almost looked like you would shatter the moment someone touched you, yet your eyes were so full of…well love I guess. But Silver…” Suddenly she halted and stared at Madison “I’m so sorry, what was I thinking bringing this up”
Philomena looked startled at her own words, like she hadn’t realized what she had been saying.
“It’s alright, I know what you mean. My father and I have never had much in common” said Madison calmly.
“I understand, but I still apologize” said Philomena looking intently at Madison.
She shrugged and smiled at her “Forget about it.” Feeling like she should say more to try and explain herself better, she added

“Dumbledore told me that blood ties chain us to people from birth, but that doesn’t mean that they rule over us. We can make our own connections.” Exhaling slowly, Madison had the sense that she wasn’t making herself clear at all. “I hope he is right” she finished quietly.
The older blonde, who looked so much like Penny, studied Madison with a curious expression “You are a very peculiar young woman aren’t you Madison?”
“Err…” she had no idea how to respond to that.
“To grow up to become so…and with your background…Quite marvellous!” continued Philomena almost to herself. Madison didn’t understand what she was talking about anymore and so kept her mouth shut just in case.
“So – you love my daughter?” said Philomena suddenly in a more lively tone after another minute of silence had passed.
“I do” affirmed Madison seriously.
Philomena stood and looked straight into Madisons eyes “Well isn’t she lucky!” Her face opened into a huge smile, that made the blue in her eyes sparkle very similarly to her daughters. “I’ll take extra pillows and blankets to Pennys room after breakfast.”

The sun had risen and was making its way across the sky when Madison returned to her room with two cups of coffee. She nudged the door open with her foot and saw that Penny was still sleeping. Smiling to herself, she placed the coffees at the bedside table and climbed back into the bed. Penny had turned in her sleep and was lying on her back now. Madison pushed some strands of hair away from her face and started tickling her nose softly.
“Kisses work better if you’re trying to wake me” mumbled Penny, the corners of her mouth twitching. Madison didn’t have to be told twice – she placed small kisses all over Pennys face, ending on her lips.
“Good morning sleepy!”
“This is the best way to wake by far” smiled Penny, finally opening her eyes. “You’re dressed already? How long did I sleep?”
“It’s almost ten o’clock. Your mother sent me upstairs to get you to join the human race as she put it.”
“You talked with my mother? How long have you been up then?” asked Penny a little worry ebbing into her face.
“Hours. I was up at dawn. Here, I brought coffee” answered Madison and handed Penny her cup.
“I could get used to this” smiled Penny balancing the hot mug on her knees. “Is everything alright? Was my mother…?” her voice faded away, leaving the unspoken question lingering.
“She was very nice, we watched the sunrise together. Oh – I’ll be joining you in your room tonight by the way, with your mothers

blessing" Madison smiled a little smugly at the surprise in Pennys face.
"How? What did you tell her?"
"We just talked, it went well I think...Come on now, drink your coffee, I'm supposed to teach your father to fly in a little while and I would prefer it if you were there with slowing charms and healing spells at hand."
Penny gaped at her open-mouthed "You are just...something else Steward!"
"Yeah, that seams to be the consensus among Haywood women today" muttered Madison, but had to brace herself quickly as Penny lunged at her and pulled her into a deep kiss.

Chapter 39

Madison spent almost half of her first full day at Pennys, trying to keep her father from killing himself. Mark was filled with child-like glee at the prospect of getting to fly on a broomstick.
“It’s sort of a dream come true you know” he explained sheepishly as he was balancing himself behind Madison.
They flew around the gardens for hours. Slowly and no higher than a few feet from the ground at first, but as Mark began to relax and got used to the feel of the broomstick and stopped fidgeting so much, Madison rose a little higher and sped up. He was ecstatic, whooping and laughing out loud during the ride, almost letting go of Madison at times. Penny and Beatrice sat at the porch and watched them while playing chess. They stopped only when Philomena came out, pulling a green cardigan around her shoulders, and hailed them down.
“Really Mark! It’s been over four hours, come inside and set the table, lunch will be ready shortly.” Pennys father thanked Madison and wobbled inside after his wife on unsteady feet, gushing all the way about the way it felt to be in the air. Madison went to the small shed to put away the broomstick. When she was about to turn and leave, she felt arms circling around her middle.
“That was very nice of you. He had the best time. Thank you!”
Madison turned around and smiled at Penny “It was fun, I’m glad he enjoyed it.”
“You scored major points with him” said Penny, wrapping her hands around Madison.
“Good. Though I’m more interested about my score with his daughter if I’m being honest” grinned Madison.
“Oh no worries there, you have the top score already” laughed Penny and pulled Madison down for a kiss.
What started slow and gentle gathered heat quickly and Madison felt herself pushed against the small wooden table with Penny still kissing her forcefully. Feeling a little uneasy making out in plain view of the house, Madison gently pulled Pennys hands from her face and leaned back, trying to convey her apprehension in going further. Penny groaned and took a step back, looking frustrated.
“Penny? Madison? Lunch is ready.” Beatrice peeked in the shed and rolled her eyes at the flustered looking couple. “Come on, you can make out later.” They followed Beatrice to the house, where the table was indeed overflowing with food.
Lunch was an enjoyable affair – Mark was still reliving his recent aerial experience and talking about his childhood dream of flying, Philomena was teasing him affectionately, while constantly adding

food the everyone's plate and Beatrice was chattering nonstop about her progress in Madam Hooches beginner lessons. Madison tried valiantly to manage the huge portion of food on her plate while listening the others talk. When the discussion turned from flying to the history of broomsticks and from there to muggle stories about witches, Beatrice yawned and left the table.
"And I believe that there is even a band called The Weird Sisters?" Mark was talking animatedly, obviously on a subject, he enjoyed discussing "Well it's clearly a reference, though a little misguided, you see in the original they are called the Weyward Sisters, it's only in the modern appellations they are renamed the Weird Sisters."
"Oh Mark, don't bore them" Philomena gently prodded her husband and he smiled apologetically "Sorry dear, it's just fascinating – the origins and...khm-khmm...You're probably right, got carried away you know...Double, double toil and trouble and all that."
"Fire burn and cauldron bubble" muttered Madison instinctively and looked up to discover everyone staring at her.
"Macbeth, act four right?" she asked, afraid that she had misspoken somehow.
"You know Shakespeare?" asked Mark, barely concealing his amazement.
"Yeah, Macbeth is one of my favorite plays" said Madison, still confused about the reaction around the table. Penny was beaming at her and her parents exchanged surprised glances among themselves before Philomena spoke "Well girls, why don't you go and rest for a while, we'll clear the table."
"Why don't we go for a walk?" suggested Penny and dragged Madison after her when she nodded in agreement.
"Don't forget the protective spells, stay inside the boundaries!" yelled Philomena after them.

"What was that?" asked Madison when they were out of hearing distance "What's wrong with liking Shakespeare?"
Penny laughed "Nothing's wrong with Shakespeare. They were just surprised, most pureblood wizards and witches don't bother reading muggle literature. And given your family...They weren't expecting you to know Macbeth, that's all."
"Oh...So? It was good that I do, right?" asked Madison, still a little confused.
"Yes!" said Penny, leaning into Madison side "It's good that you're such a dork." Madison nudged her playfully and looked around "Where are we going exactly?"
"Nowhere in particular. I just felt like walking" shrugged Penny. So they strolled around the huge gardens and slowly neared the forest

located behind the house.
“How far do the charms reach?” asked Madison looking around, hoping to see some sort of a border or outline to keep in sight.
“As far as our land goes, so a few miles in all directions. We own a small portion of the forest and the part of the beach that’s in front of our house” explained Penny. They had reached the first trees and the light around them dimmed as the sun was hidden behind the branches. The forest wasn’t very thick and there wasn’t much shrubbery. The woodland seemed relatively young and friendly compared to the Forbidden Forest. After a couple of minutes of following a small path, they reached a clearing with a large boulder in the middle.
“This is where you came to look at the stars when you were little, isn’t it?” asked Madison smiling. Penny looked at Madison with furrowed brows “How did you know that?”
“You told me. On our first date at the astronomy tower, remember?” answered Madison.
Penny looked a little taken aback “That’s right. I used to come here all the time.” She contemplated Madison “I can’t believe you remembered that.”
“Why wouldn’t I?” laughed Madison “Come on, let’s sit for a little bit. Too bad its daytime and there are no stars to see.” They climbed on the boulder and lowered themselves on a little slope in the middle of it. Madison laid on her back and pulled Penny down with her. It was very cozy, sunlight had warmed the stone beneath them and they could hear birdsong all around them between the trees.
“This is nice” Madison said after a while. “I’m glad I came. Thank you for bringing me.”
“I wasn’t even thinking about coming to this spot, my feet just carried me here automatically I suppose” replied Penny.
“No, I meant here as in your home. Thank you for bringing me to see your home.” Penny didn’t say anything, but moved a little closer to Madison.
They stayed on the boulder for a long time with Madison listening to Penny as she shared stories about her family and childhood, wondering silently about the stark contrast between their upbringing. When the sunlight had moved over them and it was getting chillier, they decided to walk back to the house.
“There is something I’ve been meaning to ask you about” said Penny when they were nearing the first flowerbeds behind the house.
“What?”
“What did Dumbledore mean when he said to you that it’s best to keep your shield close?” Madison smiled and Penny looked at her curiously.

“He meant you” she answered simply.
“What do you mean me?”
Madison sighed and looked at the sea. She was painfully reminded of the last and so far the only time she had actually said I love you to Penny. She had avoided using these words ever since, fearing the response or more precisely the absence of one.
“When I was in the vault and Jacob was trying to...you know...I thought of you and that made him back off. Dumbledore said it was love that shielded me. So in a way, it was you who protected me.”
Silence fell after Madison stopped speaking and she kept her eyes firmly on the horizon behind the waves.
“Madison...” Pennys voice was very soft and her hand was tugging hers mildly. Madison swallowed and turned her head to look at Penny with trepidation.
“Finally! Where the hell were you? Mom sent me out to look for you. Like I don’t have better things to do.” Beatrice pranced up to meet them, starting to skip around them playfully, looking very much like she indeed didn’t have anything better to do. Penny looked at Madison imploringly, but shook her head when Beatrice started to whistle merrily while circling them. Madison inhaled the wave of dejection and defeat she felt and conjured a smile on her face.

They stayed indoors for the rest of the day. Mark showed Madison the family library, which was equally filled with both muggle and wizarding literature and she browsed the shelves happily for a long time, sinking to the armchair with a hefty selection from both. Dinner was equally entertaining, if not even more so. Pennys parents were clearly feeling more comfortable with Madison and she was starting to lose some of her nervousness around them. Conversation flew freely, with Madison and Mark doing most of the talking. They found a common interest in history and literature that bored Beatrice to no end. Penny and Philomena listened to them and joined in sometimes or talked about other topics among themselves.
When it came time to go to bed, Philomena remarked casually, that she had moved Madisons bag to Pennys room and Penny, looking rather smug, pulled a crimson Madison upstairs, after saying goodnight.

Madison walked around slowly, looking at the walls in Pennys room after returning from the bathroom. There were pictures of Pennys family and friends, both muggle photos – frozen in time and magical ones, with people on them moving and waving cheerfully at Madison. There were also postcards and recipes, lists of all kinds and drawings – about everything that had been of interest to Penny at some time. Smiling to herself, Madison reflected how odd it was to be standing in

Penny Haywoods bedroom. Leaning closer to the wall to look at a photo of a young Penny holding a screaming chubby baby, who must have been Beatrice, Madison again felt arms circling her middle.
“I’m really happy you’re here” whispered Penny into her back.
Madison turned around and beamed back at her “Me too! I never dreamed I would be standing in your bedroom.” Penny chuckled and leaned in to kiss her. “I’ve wanted you in my bedroom for a long time” she said in between small kisses on Madisons neck.
“Really? Whatever for?” teased Madison. Penny neglected to answer her, but started pushing Madison towards the bed.
“Wait...wait a moment” Madison gently nudged Pennys face away from her neck to look at her. “Is this a good idea? I mean your parents-”
Penny stepped away from her and frowned, looking a little disgruntled
“My parents room is in the opposite side of the house. Besides – my mother gave us her blessing as you said.”
“I don’t think she had this in mind” smiled Madison.
“What then? Would you prefer to continue discussing Shakespeare?” asked Penny narrowing her eyes and moving closer again.
“Well he does provide endless interesting topics one could-” Madison was interrupted by Pennys lips.
“So does this mean you don’t like Macbeth?” she asked smirking at Penny.
“Please? I always wanted to...” said Penny, ignoring Madisons question and moving even closer. The need emanating from Penny infected Madison in a matter of seconds. By the time she fell to the bed with Penny on top of her, every hesitation she had flickered away, leaving nothing but an ache to be as close to eachother as possible. The few clothes they wore, found their new place on the floor next to the bed quickly. The room was completely silent around them, apart from their own quiet moans and sighs. Pennys hands moved over Madisons body gradually, but somehow it felt like they were everywhere and she found herself slipping into the blind fervor she had only ever known Penny to arouse. When her hand moved to between Madisons legs, she vaguely felt her thoughts, doubts - everything leave her in droves and her breath hitched as her hips rose. She knew better now to try and fight with herself and her eyes squeezed shut at the overwhelming sensation while her hands grasped the sheets like they were trying to stop her from floating off. Penny leaned over her and kissed her vehemently. Madison barely had the awareness to reciprocate the kiss, her mind and body so close the edge.
“Let go” whispered Penny into her ear, and without knowing if it had been the words or Pennys lips on her earlobe that had acted as the

final push, Madison did.
When her heart had finally stopped trying to escape her chest and she was able to move her limbs again, she opened her eyes to look at Penny. She was watching her with a small satisfied smile, running her fingers along her stomach absentmindedly.
“You know I’d have visited your room a lot sooner if I’d have know about the welcome I would get” she smiled through half-closed lids at Penny. She only smirked and pushed her hair from her face. Madison forced herself on her elbows and kissed the soft lips hovering at her side. Running her hand slowly from Pennys thigh up to her breast, she rose even higher and positioned herself on top of Penny. With her hands around her head, she looked into the blue eyes and felt nothing but love in every part of her body. Grinning lazily, she moved her head downwards and left kisses on her trail, stopping briefly at the invitingly pink nipples. Capturing one of them briefly in her mouth, she dragged her body with her on her consistently descending path. She kissed the sides of Pennys abdomen, reveling in the feel of her soft skin, taking her time to enjoy. Penny was sighing softly, her skin trembling under Madisons lips. When she reached her thighs, Penny moaned and closed her eyes. Madison looked up at her before diving between her legs. When her tongue made first contact, Penny groaned and arched slightly in her need to get closer. Placing one of her hands at Pennys thigh, Madison now devoted her full attention to bringing Penny to the same edge she herself had fallen off recently. With her every movement and stroke, the sounds from Penny grew louder. Her thighs squeezed Madisons head briefly and she could tell, that Penny would not last long. Her hand grasped Madisons head, fingers tangled in her locks, trying to bring her even closer than she already was. Madison complied by adding two fingers and curling them deliberately which made Pennys hips buck in her face. Trying to move with Penny instead of holding her in place, Madison increased the pace of her movements and Penny clenched suddenly in rhythmic contractions, letting out a low cry before slumping back to the bed panting heavily.

“I always wanted to have you in my room” said Penny when they lay in each others arms, their heartbeats slowing down “I hope we weren’t too loud though” she added, throwing a worried glance at the door.
“Things without all remedy should be without regard: what’s done is done” quoted Madison sleepily, nuzzling Pennys neck.
Penny was silent for a moment, then turned to look at Madison and asked with laughter bubbling in her voice “Did you seriously just quote Macbeth again?” she asked.
Madison didn’t open her eyes and replied after a small pause in a

hesitant voice “Maybe.”
When Penny didn’t say anything to that, she opened her eyes and saw, that she was staring at her with a peculiar expression.
“What?”
Penny took a deep breath and looked straight at Madison, cupping her face with her hand “Madison. I-”
A loud knocking noise emerged from downstairs, followed by a bundle of muddled voices and the sounds of people moving.

Chapter 40

Madison and Penny were half-way downstairs when they heard Dumbledores calm voice “There is no need to worry, I should have her back here in time for breakfast.” When they reached the living room, they found Pennys parents sitting around the dinner table with the headmaster positioned in the middle of them.
“Aah – Madison, there you are. Good evening to both of you. I apologize for the late intrusion” said Dumbledore rising from his seat.
“What’s going on?” asked Penny looking at Mark and Philomena, who were both looking rather grave.
“I’m afraid I require Madisons assistance in an urgent matter. I’m here to accompany you with me for a short period of time if you are willing. We shall return soon, I promise.”
“What has happened?” asked Madison fearfully.
“I’m afraid time is of the essence, we have to go quickly, I will explain on the way” replied Dumbledore and smiled when he saw Penny grabbing Madisons hand. Thoroughly confused, she looked at Penny. Her face mirrored her own shock and bewilderment and she doubled her grip on her hand as if afraid to let go. Madison however trusted Dumbledore completely and if he said there was need, she knew it to be true.
“I’ll be back” she said, gently pulling her hand from Pennys.
“We’ll explain” assured Philomena to Penny “and we’ll wait for you” she said looking at Madison. “Don’t be too long then” she added to Dumbledore with a perturbed expression.
“Have no worries Philomena, I will return her promptly. I apologize again for the late visit” bowed Dumbledore and beckoned Madison to follow her. She did so, throwing a glance over her shoulder to Penny. Dumbledore guided her towards the same clearing she had visited earlier. He walked quickly and checked his watch in haste.
“There has been another attack by your brother” he said, before Madison could speak. “This time the victim is an auror – Grace Harpis. We believe, her path crossed with your brothers by accident, as she was not on the team assigned to track him.”
“How is she?” panted Madison as she was jogging alongside the headmaster.
“That’s the reason I require your assistance – Jacob was trying to take her magic from her the same way he did from your father and mister Rook, but he was stopped before he could complete the deprivation. Friends of miss Harpis, other aurors of the ministry, attacked Jacob and though he escaped, he did not complete the ritual. The current state of miss Harpis is...abstruse.”

They had reached the trees, but Dumbledore didn't follow the same path that Madison and Penny had, taking a sharp turn to the left and walking briskly along the treeline.
"How can I help?" asked Madison, feeling lost as Dumbledore looked around and waved his wand in the air around them casually as if checking for something.
"That remains to be seen" answered Dumbledore so calmly, that Madison wanted to shake him, her own heart beating against her chest. The headmaster stopped curtly and offered Madison his hand. She took it with an annoyed look at the professor and suddenly felt a strong push from all sides of her body. Dumbledores hand twisted and she had to hold on to it tightly while she felt like someone was trying to squeeze the air out of her. The sensation ended sharply and Madison looked around – she was standing in an alleyway in the city of London. She realized where they were going in an instant and was proved right the moment she saw the familiar mannequin at the window of Purge and Dowse department store.
When they entered the lift, Madison looked at Dumbledore "What do you expect me to do?" she asked with determination. The headmaster sighed "I must confess, that I do not know. There is a strong chance, that you will not be able to do anything. I brought you here on a hunch if I'm perfectly honest." Madison nodded gravely and didn't ask anything else. When they reached the fourth floor, Dumbledore guided her to the same room Jacob had been staying for months recently. She gulped and pushed the door open.
The room was very bright, and quite noisy. There were at least seven or eight people standing, talking animatedly among themselves. They all fell silent when they looked at the doorway. Madison suddenly felt very self-conscious as she realized, that she was wearing only her tank-top and pyjama bottoms she had hastily drawn on before tumbling out of Pennys room. She ran her hand through her hair in a nervous gesture, trying to subdue the messiness she knew must be prevalent in her curls. The tallest man in the room, in a long leather coat approached them and offered his hand "You must be Madison. I'm Proudfoot. Thank you for coming." They shook hands and Madison looked around, not knowing exactly what to do next. Dumbledore came to her aid and gestured towards the middle bed which was hidden by curtains. When the screens were pulled back, Madison gasped in alarm – a slender witch with short brown hair lay in the bed, covered with a blanket. The woman looked almost the same age as Madison. Her eyes were closed, but she writhed and twisted as if in pain. She was covered in sweat and small sparks of light crackled from her knuckles and fingertips ever so often.
"She's so young!" Madison exclaimed observing the witch.

“Grace passed her aurors exams only months ago” confirmed the wizard called Proudfoot standing next to her, his eyes on the contorting figure.
“Can you do something?” asked another wizard in a pleading voice. “The healers said there is nothing that…Please – she’s our friend!” All the witches and wizards in the room nodded and muttered in agreement. Madison looked at Dumbledore helplessly, she had no idea what to do, she was no healer, nor did she know how to counter her brothers magic. Dumbledore cleared his throat and said to the room at large “You must understand, that we are all in the same boat here. Miss Steward has no new knowledge or cure to pass on. I brought her here mainly because of the singularity of the case and her connection to her brother. Call it a fools hope if you will.” Dumbledore looked at Madison and spoke now only to her “I would suggest trying to contact Miss Harpis in a similar fashion Jacob has contacted you, maybe you can find out something to aid us in our efforts.”
“But I haven’t learned legilimency” whispered Madison, feeling the tension in the room rise and her palms get sweatier by the second. “Just concentrate on her, she is in a most fragile state, her natural defenses are sure to be at their lowest.”
Madison took a deep breath and inched closer to the bed, turning her back to the room as a whole. She wished the others would leave her alone with the young auror, it was hard to concentrate with all of her friends watching her every movement. She narrowed her eyes and stared straight at Grace, willing herself to enter her mind. Predictably nothing happened and Madison felt increasingly foolish staring at the girl lying before her. She straightened herself and tried again – Grace jerked violently and Madison reached out instinctively to take the hand that was twitching on the bed. The moment she felt the womans fingers beneath her own, her eyes shut involuntarily and she felt pressure build around her. Her back arched and she levitated from the floor bringing Graces hand with her own as it now felt impossible to break their contact. She saw blinding light behind her eyelids and felt surges pass her body as if electricity was running through her bones. An unfamiliar, yet warm presence was floating in her mind, the feeling of confusion and fear deriving from it and seeping into Madisons insides. Images started flashing quickly through her mind, too fast for her to make sense of them. She caught glimpses of foreign wizards and witches, a birthday cake, a library of some sort and understood them to be Graces memories. The strange feelings of dread and turmoil increased and Madison resolved to do her best to disperse them. Attempting to focus on comfort and reassurance, she pushed forward the feelings of security and peace. Very gradually she felt the terror and fright in Grace concede but the moment she realized that,

she felt her own chest tremble and her hand jerk forcefully. A tremendous wave of weakness passed her and she groaned lowly. Concentrating even harder on maintaining her connection with the auror, she absorbed the wave and pushed on. Sweat was pouring over her face and down her back and the trembling had moved from her chest to all over her body. She started to hear voices behind her and became aware of someone trying to pry her hand away. She tried to resist, but her strength was starting to fail and she fixated on reading Grace, searching for her. Their connection was abruptly severed and Madison slumped to her knees on the hospital floor. Panting heavily, she stayed in that position to regain her composure. A strong arm pulled her up from behind and pushed her down on the bed next to Grace's. Dumbledore was leaning over her, eyeing her with a worried expression.

"Are you alright?" he asked. Madison swallowed and nodded, wiping the sweat from her face with the back of her hand. She raised her head and looked around – the other wizards and witches were watching her in wonder, mouths open and eyes wide, but Madison fixed her gaze at the witch in the bed next to her. Graces eyes were wide open and staring back at her questioningly.

"Are...how are you?" croaked Madison, her throat tight. Everyone else seemed to come out of their stupor and turned to look at Grace as well. She raised herself on her pillows and shrugged a little, looking very dazed. Dumbledore coughed and said "I think the best way to be sure is to try and cast a spell of some sort. Something quick and easy would do." He handed a wand to Grace, who took it with trembling fingers.

"Lumos" whispered Grace in a timid voice. A small light ignited at the tip of her wand and the group around her let out a collective sound of relief. Whooping and shouting, they gathered around Grace and started to hug her, congratulating her, everyone seemingly overjoyed. Dumbledore looked at Madison with a huge smile on his face.

"Well done Madison. Though you have to fill me in on what exactly transpired between the two of you."

Madison smiled back at him and pushed herself off the bed. She was just about to answer him, when she keeled over in a sudden burst of pain in her head.

"You are dead!"

Just as suddenly as it had occurred, Jacobs voice was gone and Madison looked up again, her knees quaking. Dumbledore steadied her quickly and supported her with both arms.

"Jacob?" he asked sharply and Madison only nodded.

"We have to return. It is not safe for you here anymore" said the professor and turned to the group huddled around Grace. When they

realized that Dumbledore and Madison were leaving, they shook their hands and Proudfoot hugged Madison while speaking to Dumbledore
“You will explain later won’t you?”
“I will, as soon as I make sense of it all myself” confirmed Dumbledore “But we must leave now, Madison is in danger the longer she stays outside the protected area. Besides, the transaction took a lot out of her, she needs rest. Welcome back Miss Harpis, I am very glad you are feeling back to your old self.” With that, Dumbledore walked out of the room, pulling Madison, who was leaning on him, with him.

When the familiar scent of the ocean reached Madison, she opened her eyes. Dumbledore had apparated them back to the exact spot they had left previously. She suppressed the slight queasiness she felt and turned to Dumbledore desperately “We can’t go back yet!”
“Why not?” asked the headmaster raising his eyebrows.
“We have to go back for Malcolm Rook and...and my father” said Madison emphatically, struggling to stay on her feet, but at the same time trying to make the professor raise his hand.
“I’m sorry?” asked Dumbledore calmly, not moving. Madison felt a wave of frustration at the lack of understanding the tall wizard displayed.
“We have to go to them so I can help them as well, like with Grace” she explained, her knees still wobbling. Understanding passed through Dumbledores eyes, followed by a flash of compassion.
“I’m very sorry Madison. I’m afraid that it is too late for them. The only reason you could help Grace was because her magic hadn’t left her completely yet. This is not the case with your father nor with Mr Rook.”
“How can you be sure?” asked Madison in disbelief.
“They have both been under the care of the most experienced healers. Numerous tests have been made, I’m afraid that there is no magic there to bring back, it’s as if it had never been there to begin with.” Madison deflated, for a moment she had been sure that she could reverse the mistakes made by her brother and bring peace to her father along with the unfamiliar Malcolm Rook.
“Come along now, you are not well. You need to sleep to regain your strength. Am I right in assuming that you passed over your own energy to Miss Harpis?” asked Dumbledore, tugging her gently towards the house.
“I don’t know really. I sort of felt her and I saw some of her memories. She was scared and confused and I just tried to comfort her” answered Madison glumly.
“In other words, you passed a part of yourself over to her” said Dumbledore smiling benignly. “I’m glad my hunch turned out to be

true, though I didn't imagine the expense on you to be quite so demanding." He glanced at Madison with a troubled expression "A long sleep I think and rest. I'm sure Miss Haywood will take good care of you" he winked. Madison smiled back at him and turned slightly pink under his gaze. It felt like she had been away from Pennys home for weeks, not only hours. The sky was still dark, the sun hadn't even begun to rise and Madison concluded that not much time had passed during their excursion.

When they reached the house, Dumbledore knocked gently and the door sprang open immediately. Penny hurled herself at Madison and she would have stumbled over with the sheer force of her hug had Dumbledore not been holding her steady with a surprisingly strong grip.
"We have returned" he smiled at Philomena and Mark who stood anxiously at the doorway.
"How is Miss Harpis doing?" asked Philomena apprehensively, wrapping her cardigan tighter around herself to guard against the chill of the night flowing in through the open door.
"She will be alright. Miss Harpis again possesses full control over her magic thanks to Madison" he smiled kindly at the swaying witch still in the arms of her girlfriend. "Though it took much out of her. She needs sleep and a lot of rest, nothing strenuous for a couple of days I think. If anything changes, send for me. I must take my leave now, I promised to drop in to the ministry before dawn." Dumbledore pushed Madison gingerly through the door and bowed to the Haywoods. Turning to go, he gave a final look towards Madison "You have done an incredible thing tonight Madison. Both by the standards of magical force and by show of character. I'm very proud, as you should be. Good night!" With that, he turned and strolled back towards the forest, soon disappearing into the darkness of the night. Philomena closed the door behind him and turned toward Madison and Penny.
"How are you feeling?" she asked with furrowed brows, looking up and down at Madison.
"Alright, tired" answered Madison.
"Well then, you heard Dumbledore. Go on now and rest. We'll have time to talk tomorrow and hear all about Miss Harpis" she raised her brows at Penny as if warning her not to pry Madison. "Off to bed with you." Madison nodded gratefully - in truth she was having trouble staying upright and could think of nothing else but closing her eyes and falling asleep.
"Come on" said Penny softly and took her hand guiding her upstairs. When the door to Pennys room closed again, Madison fell into the bed with a contented sigh. She marveled briefly how she had been in the

same bed just hours ago and how it felt like ages had passed, when she felt Pennys warm arms wrap around her and pull her into a tight hold. A soft kiss was placed at her nape, and smiling to herself, Madison lost consciousness.

Chapter 41

Madison opened her eyes and blinked rapidly – it was still dark though she could see the sun beginning to rise outside the window. She must not have slept for long. Turning her head, she saw that Penny was sleeping soundly beside her, her arm thrown protectively over Madisons stomach. Feeling sleep dissolving, Madison got up and tiptoed to the bathroom. The hot shower drove away the last remnants of the deep exhaustion she had felt the night before. Feeling completely awake, she went to the kitchen, thinking of coffee.
The sight of Philomenas back didn't startle her anymore and she smiled "Good morning!"
Instead it was Pennys mother who jumped in surprise "Madison! You're awake? Thank Merlin!"
Madison approached the counter and sat next to the older witch.
"Why so surprised?" she asked and accepted the cup of coffee sliding towards her.
"We we're getting worried. I was just thinking about sending word out to Dumbledore."
"What for?" asked Madison perplexedly.
"Well you slept for so long dear. A little over-" she glanced at the clock on the wall "twenty-four hours."
"What?" spluttered Madison "It's not the same night? I slept through an entire day?"
"Yes. We thought about waking you, but decided that sleep was more important than food. Are you feeling better?"
"Yes, much. I can't believe I slept so long" grumbled Madison shaking her head in disbelief.
"You looked like you needed it. When Dumbledore brought you back, you looked about ready to fall over" commented Philomena while surveying Madison.
"I feel loads better" assured Madison and sipped her coffee
"Dumbledore told you where he was taking me right?" she asked.
"Yes. And as I understand, it was wise of him to bring you?"
"I think so. The auror – Grace woke up and her magic is still there. She's going to be alright."
"And how did you manage that if I may ask?" Philomena looked at her curiously.
"I don't actually know. I touched her hand and felt a connection between us. She was so scared and so I tried to make her feel better. I don't really understand what exactly happened..."
Philomena narrowed her eyes, deep in thought. They remained silent for a little while. When Madison finished her coffee, she asked timidly

“Was Penny worried?” Philomena looked at her over her mug and smirked “You could say that yes. She almost wore a hole in our carpet by trudging up and down to see if you’re awake yet, couldn’t keep her still.”
Madison cringed, feeling guilty “I better go back there, I don’t want her to wake up and think I’m missing.”
“Of course, I’ll call when it’s time for breakfast.”

Madison lay at Pennys side and stared at the ceiling. She was wide awake, especially after the coffee she had downstairs with Philomena. She was still feeling sort of dazed at the thought of sleeping through an entire day, but her strength had returned. Figuring it might be hours before Penny wakes, she got up and found a book from the shelf before lying gingerly back down next to her girlfriend.
A few hours passed before Penny stirred. She turned and stretched on the bed and her arm searched for Madison immediately. When her eyes opened and she saw Madison awake beside her with a book in hand, she promptly rose and stared around wildly, sleep still evident in her face. Trying to calm her, Madison dropped the book and inched closer to her “Good morning” she said with a smile.
“You’re awake?” Pennys blinked, trying to shake off the remaining sleep.
“Mhmh” answered Madison, kissing Pennys cheek softly.
“And you’re ok?” asked Penny urgently, her eyes roaming over Madison as if checking for some unknown injury.
“I’m fine. I’m sorry if I worried you. Your mother told me, that I was out for an entire day. I had no idea.”
Pennys breathing grew calmer when she realized that Madison was alright. She pushed her hair back from her face and looked at her again with a softer expression “You’re alright then?”
“Yes, completely. I was alright before too, just really tired I guess.”
Penny exhaled deeply and closed her eyes. Madison winced, feeling responsible for Pennys anxiety “I’m sorry…” she offered with a small apologetic smile. Penny didn’t open her eyes, but replied “It’s fine. I was just worried you know.”
“That’s why I’m sorry” explained Madison.
“How did it go then? What happened with the auror Jacob attacked?” asked Penny.
“She’s fine. Dumbledore told me to connect with her like Jacob has done with me. I…we…I took her hand and then I sort of felt her and then she woke up” Madison knew it sounded lame, but she didn’t know how to explain it better as she herself didn’t understand exactly what had happened.
“You felt her?” asked Penny in an incredulous voice.

“Well her presence anyway” said Madison “She…kind of floated in my mind.”
Penny was silent for a moment and then asked “How did she feel?” Madisons brows furrowed slightly at the strange question but she tried to think back and remember the feeling she had when maintaining the connection with Grace.
“She felt warm and kind, but very scared. So I tried to comfort her. Dumbledore said that I passed a part of myself to her, that’s why I must have been so tired afterwards” she shrugged and smiled faintly.
Penny didn’t say anything, but her eyes were narrowed and she looked deep in thought. Madison dared a small kiss to her neck and when she met no resistance, she followed that with another kiss on Pennys nose and then another on her cheek and when she saw the beginnings of a smile starting to form, she pinned her under herself and kissed her full on the lips. Penny giggled and pulled Madison down next to her.

When they went downstairs for breakfast, Pennys mood had improved considerably. Madison pulled her to the table enthusiastically, her stomach protesting against the skipped meals of the day before. She happily accepted the large plate of eggs and toast which Philomena passed her and poured herself another cup of coffee.
“We had a letter from Dumbledore” said Mark casually over his paper.
Penny froze mid-sip and stared at her father expectantly.
“The auror you helped Madison, would like to pay us a visit. ‘Mena and I have no objections of course, but we thought we would ask you before we write back to him. What do you think?” He raised his eyes to look at Madison.
“What does she want? Is she ok?” asked Madison after swallowing a mouthful of eggs.
“Oh she’s fine. Dumbledore said, that she just wants to thank you. He offered to lift the fidelius charm for her, with our permission of course, so she could come here instead of you leaving. So – how about it?”
Madison looked at Penny. She didn’t say anything, but was completely focused on her porridge, her eyes firmly on the table.
“There truly is no need…but if she really wants to and you don’t mind…” shrugged Madison.
“Alright then, I’ll write back to him that tonight will work for us” smiled Mark and sank back behind his paper.
“It might be interesting to get to know the new generation of aurors” mused Philomena. “She’s rather young isn’t she Madison?” she asked.
“She definitely looked it. One of her friends said that she just passed her aurors tests recently” answered Madison buttering another toast.

“It might be a good chance to get to know some of your career choices after school. Not the auror office specifically, but being so young, she might have some experience to share concerning your future. What do you think honey?” Philomena addressed her question at Penny who so far had acted as if the discussion around her wasn’t happening. She gestured vaguely and excused herself from the table. Madison followed her retreating back with a pensive look, she could tell that something was up with her, but hadn’t the smallest idea what it was. She had been perfectly happy just minutes ago when they came downstairs.
Penny remained distant even after breakfast had ended. She stayed in her room and resumed reading the new book about common potions in India Philomena had gotten her for Christmas. Madison felt a little stumped when all of her questions met monosyllabic answers. When she finally asked her if something was wrong, Penny said that she was tired because she hadn’t slept rightly. Madison felt another twinge of guilt at that explanation, as she was the reason Penny had not been resting well and she backed off, trying to give the blonde some space. She opted to try and finish some of her homework and receded to the library, where she knew lay many books she could use for her essays.

Around tea time, a small knock sounded from the door. Madison gathered her parchments and books before leaving the library. When she entered the dining room, Grace stood near the window with Mark and Philomena was summoning teacups and biscuits from the kitchen to set the table. Grace turned and when catching sight of Madison, froze for a second. Madison smiled politely and gave a small wave, feeling a little bit awkward, considering their last encounter. Suddenly, without a word, Grace lunged and pulled her into an enormous hug. She was the same height as Madison and rather strong, almost crushing her with the intensity of her embrace. Out of the corner of her eye, Madison saw Penny quietly descending the stairs, Beatrice running past her. When Grace finally released her, Madison felt even more uncomfortable, but fortunately Philomena acted her part as hostess and rushed them all to the table for tea. Introductions were made casually and Mark took the lead in the conversation, asking Grace about her work in the Ministry of Magic. Penny sat next to Madison, but seemed uncommonly serious, not looking at Grace and keeping her eyes on her tea. Beatrice filled the small gaps in the conversation with her endless questions about the dark arts and the dangers involved with the aurors career. Grace answered every question with ease and seemed very relaxed until Philomena revealed that Madison had slept the entire next day after their first meeting. That brought a frown to her young face and she addressed Madison

directly for the first time: “But you’re alright now? I mean the thing you did didn’t cause any harm?”
“No. I’m fine, I was just exhausted” replied Madison.
“Well I’m not surprised. It was really intense wasn’t it? I mean…I’m still trying to figure out what exactly happened. All I know is that I felt so lost, I couldn’t keep my mind together if you know what I mean. I sort of wavered in between…But then…” Grace looked at Madison, her eyes shining.
“What happened then?” asked Beatrice breathlessly.
“I felt you inside me” answered Grace simply, still looking at Madison “I felt safe and warm and the pieces of me that were about to slide away started to sort of drift back into place. And you didn’t leave until I was whole again.”
Madison felt rather embarrassed as everyone around the table were staring at her. She tried to busy herself with her teacup, but discovered it was empty and hid her hands in her lap instead.
“I didn’t know what would happen, even Dumbledore didn’t for sure, but he had a hunch” she said to fill the silence that had followed Grace’s speech.
“Thank Merlin for his hunches” laughed Grace “And thank you Madison! I didn’t get to say it before, but I owe my life to you.” She raised her voice a little when she saw that Madison was about to protest “Yes my life, for what sort of a life could I have had if my magic would have been taken from me? It is a part of me, without it…” she held up her hands and shrugged. Again silence fell among the group and Philomena took the opportunity to divert the conversation to life outside of Hogwarts, asking questions about career options Grace had weighed before deciding and the N.E.W.T.s she had taken to prepare.
When the evening came to an end and Grace stood up to leave, Penny grabbed Madisons hand and pulled her close to her. Grace looked at them curiously, but thanked Madison again and expressed hope, that they would meet again, extending an invite to a tour in the aurors offices if she was interested. Madison smiled at her and promised to take her up on her offer in the future.

When the bedroom door closed behind Madisons back, she was pushed against it immediately. Penny lunged at her with such force, that Madison almost lost her balance. Her kiss was fierce and intense, her hands roamed over Madison possessively and for a second Madison considered succumbing to the heat rising between them without questions. She prevailed over her own cravings however and took Pennys face in her hands, effectively pausing her movements. Her blue eyes were burning with darkly with lust, but there was

something else in them, that made Madison uneasy.
“Penny, what’s going on?” she asked quietly. She felt Pennys hands drop from her side and the distance between them grew. She didn’t say anything but stepped away from Madison and turned her back to her. Madison was completely at a loss but stayed silent, waiting for a reply. Penny paced across the room several times, running her hand through her hair in apparent agitation. Finally she stopped and muttered something Madison could not hear.
"I’m sorry?"
"I don't like her" stated Penny resolutely, turning to face her.
"Grace? Why not?" asked Madison.
"Did you hear her? She couldn't stop bragging about being an auror."
"She wasn't bragging" said Madison, her eyebrows raising.
"And my mother? Like we don't get career counseling at Hogwarts. She acted like Grace was the only source for information around."
"She was just trying to help" said Madison in surprise.
"And you!" continued Penny, anger growing in her voice "I never heard you say that you wanted to visit the aurors office before. In fact I had no idea that career as an auror interested you so much before tonight!"
"It doesn’t, but it was nice of her to offer don't you think?" asked Madison, completely taken aback by Pennys anger.
"Are you going to go then?" asked Penny in an accusatory manner.
"I don't know...maybe...it could be interesting. Penny what is this all about?" Madison took a few steps towards Penny to try and hug the shorter girl. She retreated however and turned her back at Madison again. Her shoulders sagged for a moment and she took a deep breath before turning around, speaking quietly now.
"I hate that she felt you like that." Pennys blue eyes were steely and unwavering as she looked at Madison. "And I hate that you felt her."
Madisons eyes widened in sudden understanding and her heart fell. She shook her head and spoke slowly to make sure that she was heard "It was not like that Penny."
"She felt you inside her! She said so herself. Didn't you see how she was looking at you?" Pennys voice was rising again and she looked close to tears.
"Penny! Stop! It was not like that..." Madison sighed and looked at her feet, trying to remain calm. "There was nothing...like that. It was only our minds that-"
"I know" scoffed Penny dismissively "It's even worse, can't you understand that? She felt the real you and you...you felt her, didn't you?"
"Well what was I suppose to do?" asked Madison, starting to feel irritated with the situation. "Would you have preferred that I didn't

help her? Leave her without her magic? Like I had a choice...Besides, I didn't know what was going to happen when I went in there, no one did. Dumbledore guessed, but..."
"I know you didn't have a choice. Of course you had to help her. I didn't mean it like that." Penny deflated and sat on the edge of her bed.
"I know all that" she continued in a quiet voice, looking at the floor "But it doesn't make it easier to know that someone else has been closer to you than I have ever been or will be."
The full weight of Pennys words finally reached Madison and her heart almost broke at the sight of her defeated figure sitting on the bed. She gulped, and kneeling down in front of her, took her hand gently between her own.
“Listen to me – yes we shared a connection, but it was not like what you think.” Madison felt her shoulders tensing with the anxiety of trying to explain herself, of trying to make Penny understand.
“What we shared was in our minds, I didn’t know it would happen. When I felt her, she was in my head – her memories, her magic. But you? You are in my heart. And I don’t need any special circumstances to feel you. You are always there Penny, I feel you in my heart always. And no one has ever been closer.” Penny looked up at Madisons words, but she continued talking, a little desperately.
“I was just trying to help her, it was my brother after all who messed her up. I mean Snape has been in my mind for Merlin’s sake, you don’t-”
“I love you” interrupted Penny suddenly in a soft voice, looking at Madison intently.
“You..you..what?” stammered Madison, so consumed by her need to explain herself to Penny, that she thought she had heard her incorrectly.
“I love you” stated Penny again, more firmly this time, her blue eyes boring into Madisons brown ones.
Madisons heart skipped a beat and then proceeded to flutter happily in her chest.
“You lo-” she started quietly when Penny interrupted her once more, dropping down from the bed and kneeling beside Madison.
“Yes! And I’ve been trying to tell you for ages, but something always comes up. My parents or Dumbledore or Beatrice or...or...And I wanted it to be special so you would know I really mean it. I wanted to tell you how much you mean to me and how I have never wanted anything as much as I want you and how I can’t be without you ever again. I almost said it a million times before, but I always held back for the perfect moment and then you said it and I wanted to say it back right away, but then Dumbledore started to...and then...my

parents...and I couldn't find you and then..."
Madisons smile grew during Pennys rant until her cheeks were starting to hurt, but Penny showed no signs of stopping.
"I wanted to tell you how much I love your messy hair and the way you crinkle your nose when I brew something smelly. And the way your eyebrows move while your reading an interesting book and the way you sigh when the book is not good. And the way you play with your quill when you are thinking what to write and the way you throw your arm around me through your sleep. And the happy look you get after you score in quidditch and how you smile at me when I see you in the morning..."
Pennys voice finally faded and she took a breath, looking at Madison with wide glistening eyes. Madison felt so light with happiness that her head was slightly spinning.
"I love you too!" she said a little breathlessly. Penny sniffled and leaped at her, both of them toppling to the floor in a tight embrace. They lay there in a heap, legs tangled, faces pressed into each others necks until Penny whispered almost inaudibly "I'm sorry about before." Madison rolled her shoulders in a dismissive gesture, shaking her head slightly.
"I should have mentioned my affair with Snape sooner" she grinned. Penny chortled and muttered "Doofus" into Madisons ear, before kissing it affectionately.

Chapter 42

"I don't understand why you can go and I can't" said Penny stubbornly, staring at her mother over the dinner table.
Philomena sighed "I've told you already – I have worked in the ministry, I have contacts in place. I promised Dumbledore that I would escort Madison there safely. But most importantly, it is not wise for us all to go, surely you can see why." Penny pulled her eyes off of her mother and tapped her foot on the floor impatiently.
"I know you worry about her, but I promise you, that I will bring her back as soon as they are done. I will do everything in my power to hasten her involvement as much as possible, as will Dumbledore I'm sure" added Philomena in a pacifying tone to her eldest child.
Penny only harrumphed at that explanation and walked over to the window.
"Everything will be alright, don't worry" said Mark softly, moving to stand next to Penny and placing his hand on her shoulder “She will get through this honey.”
Madison got up quietly from her position at the top of the stairs and backtracked to Pennys room, closing the door quietly after her. She hadn't meant to eavesdrop, but had frozen after hearing her own name spoken downstairs. Her fathers trial was set to take place the next day and arrangements had been made that Philomena would take her to the ministry so that she could give her testimony. She was beyond nervous about the trial. When she thought of having to talk about that day in the last vault with a bunch of strangers in a very official setting, cold tremors started running in her spine. She had no idea what to expect or how detailed her testimony had to be, although Philomena had assured her, that it would most likely last no more than an hour. Penny had not mentioned the trial to Madison, but it was obvious that she too was anxious about it. Learning that she tried to persuade her mother to bring her along to the ministry sent a wave of affection over Madison, though she was glad that Philomena had not agreed, as she much preferred to keep Penny far away from anything to do with her father or brother.
Not surprisingly, Madison woke very early the next day. She had not slept well, tossing and turning for hours before succumbing into a shallow sleep. Philomena had a cup of coffee waiting for her already when she shuffled to the kitchen.
"Am I so predictable?" smiled Madison, taking her usual seat next to the older woman.
"I just had a feeling" she replied with a small smile. "Nervous?"
"Yes." Madison saw no point in pretending and glanced at Philomena

"Do you know how exact I have to be? I mean – do I only have to talk about my father or Jacob too? And the vaults?"
"Dumbledore told me, that the council has knowledge about the background concerning the vaults so I would deduce that confirming some specifics about Silver should suffice." She poured herself another cup and continued as if convincing herself now "This is all just a formality in any case. They just need your testimony to make it official."
Madison kept her eyes on the now familiar view of the ocean "So my father will definitely go to Azkaban?" she asked quietly. Philomena took her time before answering, observing Madison closely as if evaluating and measuring her preparation for her reply. Finally she simply nodded "Yes" and kept her eyes on her face, wary for the reaction. Madison didn't say anything however and kept looking at the waves slowly gliding towards the shore.
"It will get better again." Madison came out of her thoughts and realized that she had no idea how long she had been silent next to Pennys mother.
"Time will pass and you will feel better again" continued Philomena "You can handle this. And we will be there to help you in any way that we can."
"Thank you. For letting me stay here, for coming with me to the ministry and...for giving me a chance. I know it’s not easy. Being under the fidelius charm and...I know you worry about Penny and me with my parents being...the way they are. So – thank you." Madison didn’t look straight at Philomena when she said this. She felt awkward voicing her gratitude, but didn’t want to leave it unsaid.
Before Philomena had a chance to say anything, Penny entered the kitchen, still in her pyjamas.
“There you are.” She hugged Madison from behind and stole a sip of her coffee.
“Why are you up so early?” asked Philomena from her daughter with a knowing smile. Penny just shrugged and took a seat next to Madison. They looked at each other and intertwined their fingers on the table.
“Oh ho! And I thought I was the early-bird today.” Mark entered the kitchen, smiling widely at the women sitting at the counter. Philomena busied herself with an early breakfast for all while Mark opened his paper. Penny and Madison continued looking at each other. Madison could feel Pennys nerves and the slight fear running under her skin.
“It will be fine. I will be back before you know it” she said to the other girl quietly, running smoothing circles over her hand with her thumb.
“I know” she answered in a small voice “I just want it to be over

already."
"Yeah, me too" admitted Madison.
"Remember, that I'm here, waiting for you, ok? And that I love you."
Madison beamed at Penny "I will."

The ministry looked even more intimidating to Madison than she had envisioned. The entrance itself was huge. She kept looking around in every direction and bumped into several ministry employees as a result. They were often stopped on their way to the court-room when Philomena spoke to some of her previous colleagues and friends. Madison eyed the massive statue in the middle of the atrium with distaste while she waited for Philomena to finish catching up with one of her many acquaintances. The lift let them out with a loud clanging noise and they walked down a large stone corridor. There were fewer people moving there and the sounds from their footsteps echoed loudly. Multiple doors stood on both sides of the hall, though all but one were closed. Philomena laid her hand on Madisons shoulder and they walked slowly towards the open door. The room inside was huge, almost as large as the great hall in Hogwarts, but much darker. There where torches all around the dark stone walls, but no windows. Seats surrounded the walls on all sides except the one where the entrance was located.
In the middle of the room sat Madisons father. He looked smaller somehow as if the chair was too big for him. His leg was bouncing and he was biting his fingers and fidgeting with his shirt, forehead glistening. His eyes darted around the room and he glanced at the doorway, straight at Madison but didn't seem to recognize her because his gaze didn't linger. Madison gulped and entered the room tentatively. She was surprised the feel Philomena follow her.
"Are you coming too?" she asked her hopefully, stopping at the entrance.
"If you don't mind? I have cleared it with the Wizengamot but I can wait outside if you prefer of course."
"No. Stay. Thank you" Madison felt a small wave of relief pass over her. It felt easier to face the trial with someone familiar in the room besides Dumbledore.
She moved further inside the hall and was met by her headmaster who walked quickly up to meet them.
"Perfect timing, thank you Philomena. This way if you please Madison" he guided her towards the seats at the side, on the same level as the chair his father was sitting, but not facing directly the raised platform that was now filling with grim looking witches as wizards.
"It will be a little while before they call on you, but not long. I have

asked them to take your testimony first, so you can leave right after."
Madison nodded and took a seat. Dumbledore squeezed her shoulder once and then climbed up the small stairs to join the other council members. Looking behind her back, Madison saw, that Philomena had taken a seat right next to the entrance. When their eyes met, she smiled encouragingly at her.
The man in the middle seat of the raised platform coughed loudly and banged his gavel on the table in front of him and the doors closed behind Madisons back. Silence fell in the room and a short balding wizard who stood on the same level as Madison, started to read in a monotone voice from the parchment in his hand. It was quite hard to follow what he was saying, but Madison understood it to be the accusations against her father, hidden in heaps of legal jargon. Looking around, she wondered briefly about the lack of other witnesses, as she was the only one sitting at the designated chairs. She also noted the lack of guards or aurors, but remembered with a jolt, that they were probably not needed since Silver had no powers to use. She surveyed the people sitting in the room – most were listening intently what the clerk was reading, some were taking notes during his report. Dumbledore was sitting on the right side of the man with the gavel. On his left, a stern looking witch with a monocle looked back at Madison, her eyes narrowed.
"You are Madison Steward?" A loud voice broke through Madisons thoughts and she looked around wildly. The whole of Wizengamot was looking at her now.
"Yes" she replied, sitting up straighter hastily.
"You are the daughter of Silver Steward, present here?"
"Yes." Her father bared his teeth at her answer and started muttering under his breath, his fists clenching.
"Your father came to your school at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry on the 20th of March this year under the pretense of the spring ball?"
"Yes."
"Can you tell us what happened on that day?"
Madison gulped and took a deep breath. She kept her eyes on the opposite wall, clenched her jaw and started to speak. She described how she had met her parents, or so she had thought at the time, how they had walked towards the statue of Wilfred the Wistful and how her father had attacked her and then Merula. When she told them about being placed under the imperius curse, the witch with the monocle stopped her and asked her to describe the effects of being under the spell. Madison detailed her experience as best she could and went on with her story. All the while she was speaking, Silvers muttering grew louder and she could hear him shifting in his seat. She

didn't look at him, but focused on keeping her breathing normal. The further she got, the harder it was to press the words out. As she spoke, the memory of being in the vault floated back into her mind from the deep reaches she had banished it weeks ago. She didn't want to remember anything from that day, every little scrap of information dragged with itself a piece of darkness she had known and she started to feel the familiar numbness take hold of her. When she was finally reaching the end, she had to force almost every word out through clenched teeth and her head was throbbing with rhythmic pulses of dull pain.
"So your father cast the unforgivable curse on you? The cruciatus curse?" asked one of the members of the Wizengamot.
"No" answered Madison, closing her eyes for a second "He tried, but he couldn't. He couldn't cast any curses or spells anymore."
"And then what did he do?" asked the same wizard.
"He hit me and said that he needed to get to Jacob. Then we left the vault."
"I should have strangled you instead!" A low growl emerged from Silver and against her better judgment, Madison raised her eyes to him. He was looking straight at her now, leaning towards her from his chair.
"Silence!" the gavel banged loudly against the table, but neither Madison or Silver broke their stare.
"You have ruined me you wretched fool!" hissed Silver slowly with venom "You are nothing but a disgrace to my family."
"Silence! Order!" the gavel was banging furiously with loud thuds and the room was filled with shocked mutterings from the platform. Dumbledore stood abruptly and whispered something urgently to the man on his left.
"The witness is excused, you may leave" shouted the man and banged his gavel again forcefully. Dumbledore gestured to Philomena who was already standing next to Madison. She took her elbow and pulled her up from her seat. Madison was still staring at her father, whose face was now bloodless, the corner of his eye twitching rapidly. His hands were gripping the arms of his chair, his knuckles white. He seemed to exercise all of his self-control not to lung himself at his daughter. Philomena dragged Madison backwards, away from the room, towards the exit. Just as Madison was about to turn her back to the hall and follow her, Silver shouted "You're the biggest mistake I-" Dumbledores wand moved so quickly that Madison hardly saw it. A second later her fathers mouth clamped shut and his eyes bulged, it looked like he was unable to speak anymore.
"Order! Order I said!" shouted the man next to Dumbledore, clutching his gavel with a frustrated look behind him where some of the witches

and wizards were also standing. With a final look at his father, Madison turned and let Philomena drag her out of the room.

Philomena almost lifted Madison away from the door after it closed behind them. Her hand was around Madisons shoulder and her fingers clasped around her arm almost painfully. Glancing at her, Madison saw, that the older witch was as white as her father had been. They half-jogged towards the lift and when the golden doors clanged shut, Madison gently pried the hand gripping her away from her shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze.
“That could have gone better I guess” she said, trying to jolt Philomena out of her trance. She turned to look at her and Madison was startled to see, that her blue eyes were glistening with tears. The lift reached the atrium and the doors opened. Madison moved to exit the lift, but Philomena just stood there, staring at her with wide eyes. Madison took her hand again and pulled a little, smiling feebly “Come on, you’re my ride remember.” They walked like that in silence, holding hands, to one of the gilded fireplaces when Philomena finally spoke.
“Wait, we need to talk” she exhaled and blinked several times before looking at Madison. “I know this is an infuriating thing to ask, but forgive me – how are you feeling?”
Madison smiled at her sadly and shrugged “I’ve been better...but I’ve also been worse so...”
Philomena pressed on “I need you to understand, that nothing that you heard is true. Nothing he said-”
“I know” interrupted Madison, wanting to avoid a replay of his fathers words.
“But...are you alright? I mean really alright?” asked Philomena looking at her intensely, grabbing her hands again.
“No” answered Madison simply “But I will be. I’ve done this before.” She looked at the large statue in the middle of the atrium for the last time before turning back to the older witch “As you said - I can handle this.”

Chapter 43

Madison felt Pennys anxious eyes on her when she flopped on the bed. They had not talked about the trial during dinner, though both Philomena and Mark had looked equally concerned and the conversation felt rather forced. Beatrice had tried to find out more from Madison, but fell silent quickly at her mothers warning stare. Madison wouldn't have minded talking about her testimony as much as the others seemed to think she would. Her fathers words hadn't affected her as strongly as she had thought they would. She supposed that it was because she knew his thoughts already, they were not news to her. She was slowly making her own peace with it and though it was painful, she found that she was able to do so. She felt the irony of her childhood having prepared her for this during her whole life, having never had a proper relationship with her father, made the ending of one much easier.
"What do you want to do tomorrow?" she asked Penny, taking her socks off in preparation for bed. When Penny didn't answer, but kept looking at her, she smiled "I'm fine, stop staring at me like that."
"Like what?" blinked Penny, caught in the act.
"Like you think I might brake or something. Look – the trial...well it sucked and my father...he said many bad things. But I'm fine, I promise. So you can stop walking on eggshells around me, alright?" Madison got up and slid her hands around Penny, kissing her chastely. "I just want to think about how we are going to spend our remaining free days before we have to go back to school." Penny narrowed her eyes at Madison and stared into her face searchingly for a moment, but then leaned in slowly and pressed her lips against hers, whispering into them "I can think of a few things to do." Madison smiled, returning her kiss "There's the spirit of resourcefulness I was looking for."

On her way back from the bathroom, Madison distinctly heard someone crying downstairs and froze at the top of the stairs.
"The things that man said to her. To her own daughter! I just couldn't believe it! He should have been silenciod from the very beginning, I don't know what they were thinking!"
"Shh! It's over now, she's back and it's done." Madison bent over and peeked into the living room partially visible from the stair top. Mark was holding Philomena in his arms near the window, drawing soothing circles on her back.
"She was incredible Mark. The strength it must have taken her to relive that day in front of all those people and her father sitting

there...Oh it was awful! I just wanted to hide her away from all of that the moment we stepped into that room. But after it was over...I think I was more stunned than she was. She actually comforted me if you can believe that."
"I can actually. I think she is much stronger than we, or she herself for that matter, realize."
"But no sixteen year old should ever be...Could you imagine if Penny or Beatrice-"
"Stop! Don't torture yourself like that! All we can do now is to offer her a place she can feel safe in, some stability and support."
Madison got up and tiptoed back to Pennys room quietly.
Penny was reading, propped up against pillows. When she saw Madison enter, she smiled at her, but then returned to her book. When Madison had changed and slid under the blanket, she closed the book and took Madison in her arms.
"You know I think my father would like to fly again."
"Yeah, I figured, he has been dropping hints. We can do that tomorrow morning if he's free."
"He is. He took this week off from work. You don't mind?"
"Of course not, I never mind flying." Penny kissed Madisons back and pulled her closer. "And I have some gardening to do. There are some ingredients I need to gather. Mom promised we could try the Wolfsbane potion before my vacation ends."
"Wolfsbane potion? That's really cool and it might come in handy – I'm sure there must be at least one werewolf in Hogwarts."
"Oh and I should warn you – I saw my father dust off his complete works of William Shakespeare – so you're probably bound to end up having to listen him rant about the significance of the ghost in Hamlet or something."
Madison chuckled "Looking forward to it. I have my own rant to give on that subject as a matter of fact." Penny kissed her back again and stayed silent for a while. Just as Madison had closed her eyes, she whispered "Are you really alright after today?" Madison turned around and faced her. She could barely make out Pennys face in the dark room, but her hair shone faintly in the moonlight drifting into the room through the window. She pushed a strand of her hair away from her face and said softly "I'm glad that today is over. And I'm still sort of processing everything...but I know I will be alright and that's a lot to begin with don't you think?"

Madison slid quietly into her usual seat at the counter and accepted the mug of steaming coffee from Philomena without saying anything. When she glanced at the witch next to her, she saw, that her eyes were bloodshot and droopy, she must not have slept well.

“I have to explain something to you” started Madison without any introduction, gripping her mug resolutely. Philomena turned her eyes at her expectantly.
“When I was little, my father used to take my brother out with him on occasion. I don’t really know what kind of events they visited, Jacob always described them as boring parties with my fathers friends, but that’s all I know. He never took me. And he used to call Jacob to his study at least once a week to teach him about our family history. I only know what Jacob told me and it wasn’t much, he didn’t really care about that stuff. We never went anywhere together, all four of us. It was mostly Jacob and my father, sometimes they went all three of them, my mother too. When I needed something, they would drop me off in London with money and I bought what I needed on my own. I bought my wand alone and my first robes for Hogwarts, all that stuff.” Madison paused for a moment and looked at the view of the sun rising over the ocean that had become one of her favorites during the holiday.
“What I’m trying to say is that, I’ve been on my own for a long time – I’ve gotten used to it. When I heard my father say the things he said in the vault and after, when you found us, it hurt of course and it took some time to take it in. Penny helped me a lot actually. But it…it wasn’t out of the blue. I think I sort of always knew…and when he said it again yesterday – well…I was kind of prepared that it was coming if you know what I mean. So it’s not like a big shock to me or anything…So you don’t have to worry so much. I’m not…traumatized by it or anything like that…I don’t want you to think that I’m broken or cracked…or…defective or something like that – because I promise you I’m not.”
Philomena dropped her mug with a loud clang and looked like she wanted to interrupt, but Madison continued without letting her intervene “I meant what I said to you before. I plan to make my own connections. Me and Penny…I love her” Madison couldn’t hold back a smile when voicing her next words “And she loves me.” Taking a deep breath, she pressed on “And I need you to believe me when I promise that I would never hurt her or let her be in harms way. My fathers behavior hasn’t affected me so that couldn’t-”
“I’m sorry, but I have to say something” huffed Philomena raising both of her hands in protest. “I know you love Penny, it’s obvious to anyone who sees the two of you together - you love each other very much. I admit that Mark and I were not…enthusiastic about the two of you from the beginning…But we were clouded by our own little bubble of prejudices. They go both ways you see…The only thing one can do is to try and open their eyes and admit when they are mistaken. And we were mistaken about you. I have no difficulty in

believing that your only wish is to make Penny happy. After getting to know you as a person...well I have no doubt that you will succeed." She smiled kindly at Madison before gripping her mug tighter as if bracing herself for the words yet to come.
"As for your father...I must admit, that the way he behaved, unsettled me deeply. If you had been brought up in a different household, you would understand better why. I do not think less of you in any way because of his words, neither does Mark, but our reaction...If anything, we think more highly of you after yesterday. You are truly a remarkable person, Dumbledore was right about you." A heavy silence filled the kitchen as Madison and Philomena looked at each other.
"Well then...thank you...I guess" muttered Madison, feeling extremely uncomfortable.
"You are quite welcome" smiled Philomena taking a sip from her cup. "I hope you are prepared for another flying lesson? Mark has been dying to ask you for another go." Madison let out a breath, grateful to Philomena for changing the topic. "Sure, I'll be glad to. We thought we might try today as a matter of fact."
"Well try and tell him about all the horrible quidditch injuries you have suffered, won't you?"
"I haven't had any quidditch injuries" answered Madison with furrowed brows. Philomena only raised her eyebrows at her and poured herself another cup of coffee.

Chapter 44

Even after being back at Hogwarts for over two days, Madison found it hard to get used to the bustle and noise of hundreds of students in the halls and corridors. She had gotten so accustomed to the peaceful quiet and the soothing sound of waves crashing into the shore at Pennys home, that the contrast with the lively and packed school, where boomerangs were whirling past her head and ghosts glided through walls was a lot to take in at first. She did feel a sense of familiarity when she unpacked her bag in her dorm room, but what warmed her back into the liveliness of Hogwarts above all, was seeing her friends again. Rowan squealed when she ran up to hug her and Tulip grinned widely, shoving her, when they stepped into the common room. They didn't get much sleep the first night, as they all sat up in their beds, sharing tales from their vacations and eating chocolate frogs.

The last days at Pennys had passed in quiet bliss. With the ever-looming stress of the trial gone from her mind, Madison felt much more relaxed and enjoyed her time with the Haywood family immensely. She relished her evening talks with Mark, her morning coffee with Philomena and her playful teasing with Beatrice. Most of all, she basked in the undisturbed hours spent alone with Penny. They took long walks on the beach, spent hours star-gazing in the forest clearing and had picnics in the garden. As far as Madison was concerned, her holiday had been near perfect.

The first weeks of the last semester turned out to be the busiest Madison had experienced in Hogwarts. All the teachers talked about nothing but exams and gave out homework assignments that put together took almost every free slot of time from the students already busy schedules. In stark contrast with Tonks and Tulip, Madison didn’t mind the heavy workload – she actually preferred it. With her mind conveniently occupied with dates and incantations, she didn’t have much time left over to obsess about Jacobs whereabouts.

But unfortunately spring progressed and every passing day brought sprouting waves of anxiety for Madison. She almost wished that news of Jacob attacking someone would reach her. This eerie silence was beginning to feel like an ominous foreboding of something Madison could not predict. Her brother had always been prone to act quickly and decisively, but she didn't trust her own knowledge about Jacob anymore, the boy she thought she knew was long gone. Madison now carried her wand with her everywhere and kept it in her sleeve so it would be easily accessible. During lessons, she practiced wand movements for stunning spells and protective charms under the table,

so that her teachers and other students would not see her. Since she was not allowed to go flying or visit Hogsmeade, she increased her training and spent countless hours in the room of requirements. She emerged, sweaty and exhausted, her muscles tight and wiry, but significantly calmer every time. It made her feel better to make her limbs bend to her control, feel her body succumbing to her will. At least she knew that she could control some part of herself, even if her mind was like an open door for Jacob to walk into. She did try to practice occlumency whenever she could, but it seemed futile to clear her mind when there was no one prying their way inside, it only made her look like she had blanked out and accounted for lost housepoints when teachers caught her staring into space during lessons, or her friends mocking her playfully for losing focus. She had a nagging feeling, that trying to clear her mind when Jacob would try to talk with her would be a much harder task to accomplish. Not to mention, she had no idea if and when her brother would force entrance to her mind again. This all made Madison feel very on the edge, she became increasingly restless and terse and not even Penny fully succeeded in calming her nerves.
"What are you looking for?" Madison barely heard Penny as she was deep in thought, her eyes moving slowly over the grounds of Hogwarts.
"Hmm?"
"I said what are you looking for?" repeated Penny, a note of annoyance in her voice.
"Nothing in particular" replied Madison, her gaze remaining slightly unfocused.
"Maybe he went into hiding...maybe he has given up. The vaults are gone." Pennys eyes moved thoughtfully along the edges of the Forbidden Forest as they stood at the astronomy tower, knowing without having to ask what was going on in the others mind. Madison shook her head, her jaw clenched and she pulled Penny closer to herself protectively.
"No. Jacob will never give up. And the idea of him hiding...He's out there somewhere. I just wish I knew what he was thinking, what he is planning. This waiting...it's getting on my nerves."
"I couldn't tell" grumbled Penny quietly. Madison turned her head to look at her girlfriend and her expression softened.
"I know I haven't been the best company recently. It's just...this not knowing is making me tense. I'm sorry."
Penny hummed against Madisons shoulder dismissively and placed a small kiss on her neck. Madison continued "I wish there was something I could do. Something active. Sometimes I think, that I would prefer that he just come to me, so we could-"

"No!" Pennys hold on Madison tightened abruptly and her head shot up to look into her eyes. "You can't go anywhere near him, you hear me!" she added with unusual fury. Madison was taken aback by Pennys sudden reaction.
"Hey, it's ok" she said softly while pulling Penny from her side to stand in front of her. "Are you ok? You seam...I don't know..." she narrowed her eyes at her "Are you angry?" Penny deflated and looked down, her shoulders sagging under Madisons hands.
"No...I think I'm a little jumpy too." She looked at Madison, the blue in her eyes glinting sadly "Promise me you won't..."
"Won't what?" asked Madison raising her eyebrows.
"Go looking for him" replied Penny softly.
Madison surveyed her girlfriend for a moment without saying anything. Pennys grasp stiffened and her eyes scanned her face intensely with a pleading look.
"Ok" Madison finally answered with a somber expression, nodding her head imperceptibly. Penny exhaled and yanked her into an eager kiss, her lips equally soft and demanding. Pulling Madison against her, she traced her waist, her back, her neckline and shoulders with her hands all the while kissing her lips with increasing fervor. Madisons brain was entering hibernation mode and her senses were overloading, the feeling of losing control, but somehow not caring one bit drowned her and she felt the warm tingling in her stomach spreading all over her body. She reflected fleetingly how Pennys touch accomplished much more than weeks of occlumency training had. Suddenly Penny pulled away and leaned her forehead against Madisons shoulder, breathing heavily. She squeezed Madison tight against her once more and said "Come on, let's get inside, I still have to finish that essay for McGonagall tonight." Slightly flushed and bewildered, Madison nodded and followed her without further questions.
During dinner Rowan kept trying to get everyone near her to quiz her about their latest transfiguration homework but managed only to drive away both Charlie and Tonks, with the latter mumbling something about life being too short. Penny took pity on Rowan and spent the remaining mealtime trading facts with her. Madison moved her fork around the plate moodily, only half-listening the spew of information bursting from Rowan.
“I think I’m going to bed early. I’m not really hungry.” She pushed her plate away and got up. Penny eyed her questioningly.
“I’m ok, I think I could just use a good long sleep.” She placed a small kiss on Pennys cheek and waved her goodbye to Rowan before scuffing out from the great hall.
When Madison reached her bedroom, it was empty. With dinner still going on, it was far too early for Tulip and Rowan to come to bed. She

laid out Pennys nightclothes, changed into her own pyjamas and sat at the side of her bed. The room seemed stuffy and oppressive somehow. The anxiety about her brother felt like an ever-present ax hanging over her neck, she just couldn't relax. Sighing deeply, she punched her pillow with her fist, the need to do something was growing and the only things keeping her from running away to find Jacob herself were the fact that she had no idea where to look for him and the promise she made to Penny. Wanting to free her mind of him, she grabbed a book from her nightstand and descended back to the common room to read by the fire. The room was curiously as empty as her bedroom had been. She supposed, that everyone were still eating and threw herself into the nearest sofa. She had been reading for only a few minutes, when sparks flying from the fireplace drew her gaze up from the chapter about Morgana le Fay and the book fell to the floor with a dull thump. Cassias face was staring at her from the fireplace.

"Mother!" Madison fumbled up from the sofa and fell on her knees next to the fireplace. Nothing could have shocked her more. Even Morgana le Fay herself appearing in the fire at Gryffindor common room would have been more reasonable to her than seeing her mothers face there.
"What are you doing?"
"Hello Madison." Cassias voice had lost none of its steeliness. She looked around the common room quickly and turned her eyes back to Madison.
"You are alone. Good, I needed to talk to you in private."
"Where are you? Where have you been? Are you with the League?" Questions burst from Madison without her even understanding what she was asking.
Cassia frowned "My whereabouts are not important." She halted briefly "Your brother has not stopped his hunt for the powers of the cursed vaults."
"Yeah, I figured" quipped Madison dryly.
"You need to meet him."
"What? Why do you want me to meet him?" spluttered Madison.
Cassia closed her eyes for a second as if bracing herself and spoke quickly, almost mechanically.
"There is a prophecy concerning the vaults."
"I'm aware" growled Madison.
"The prophecy also includes you."
Madison eyes opened wide and she slumped back on her heels. "Me? But I thought-"
"Never mind that now" hissed Cassia. "I don't have much time, I'm not in a secure location. We need to meet face to face and I'll explain.

There is a reason you have to meet your brother and perform your part."
"Perform my part? You mean let him kill me?"
"No!" Cassias face went livid and it seemed like the sparks from the fire were bursting straight from her eyes. "Of course not." She took another steadying breath and added "He needs to take the magic of the vault from you."
Madison didn't say anything for a moment. There were too many thoughts running around in her head to pick one to articulate. Before she could focus, her mother continued in a slightly softer tone.
"Think about your friends. And your girlfriend, if you still have one."
For a moment Madison could only see white before her eyes and her nape stiffened. She swallowed thickly and felt her heart starting to thump against her chest rapidly.
"Why...what does he...what-" she stuttered, overwhelming panic taking a hold over her ability to form coherent sentences.
"If you won't come to him, he might try and reach you through other means...other incentives." Cassia surveyed the effect from her words on Madisons face with something that resembled pity.
"I have to go. I'll arrange a meeting soon. Don't talk to anyone about this, it is a family matter."
Madison was breathing heavily "A family matter? Are you fucking kidding me!" she yelled at her mother. Cassias expression distorted and for a moment, Madison saw for the first time how much she resembled Jacob.
"Yes a family matter! Do you want to pull more people into this? I thought you wanted to keep your friends safe. Stop acting like a child and face the reality for once." With one final breath, she added in a calmer tone "I'll contact you soon" and with a soft popping sound her face disappeared from the fire.

Chapter 45

Madison forced her hands to stay still while her body shivered under the stream of cold water. After a few minutes, the intense chill was slowly starting to shift towards feeling pleasant and her shoulders relaxed. Breathing deeply, she opened her eyes and tilted her head back. She had been awake most of the previous night. When Penny came to bed, she had pretended to be asleep, not yet ready to tell her about Cassias sudden reappearance. She still wasn't ready, but the shower had helped to clear her mind. Her first instinct had been to keep quiet and say nothing to any of her friends. She had done so in the past, every time something like this came up she retracted into herself and sought peace of mind in solitude. However, this past year with Penny had taught her to know better. She recognized her instinct for what it really was – fear and the resulting desire to hide. Her eyes looked bloodshot and weary when she observed herself in the mirror. Biting her lip, she nodded resolutely to her reflection and got dressed. She would not hide anymore, she had to tell Penny and Rowan and all the others, what Cassia had told her. After all – her mother had said that it was a family matter, they just meant different families. Nonetheless – Madison was not looking forward to talking with her friends. The gnawing feeling of guilt that she had not been able to get rid of since her first days in Hogwarts, wavered around her, making her feel small and wretched. She knew, what Penny and all her friends would say – that it wasn't her fault, that they would help her in any way that they could. But the fact remained – without her, the cursed vaults, her brother and the threat that they were now in, would not have been a part of their lives. By the sheer act of being friends with Madison, or in Pennys case, much more, they were in jeopardy and Madison could not reconcile her own conscience with that truth.
She returned to Gryffindor common room after classes. She knew that Penny would be there already, they had agreed to meet after lessons ended. When she climbed in through the portrait, she saw that not only was Penny present, but she was joined by Tulip, Tonks and Rowan. They were all seated around a small table by the window. When Tonks spotted Madison, she waved her over and pulled an extra chair next to her own. Madison felt a small tinge of irritation about being presented with the perfect opportunity to talk with her friends so soon, but shook it away immediately. It was better to get it over with, she had enough concerns weighing her down, this was one that she could take care of.
"Wotcher Madison!" said Tonks cheerily, returning her eyes back to the game of exploding snap they were playing.

"Hey all!" replied Madison with a forced smile and took a seat. "Hi" she added in a lower voice to Penny, kissing her cheek. She pursed her lips towards her and tilted her head, but didn't remove her gaze from the table. "Hey!" she answered and tapped her wand swiftly on a card before it could explode.
"Are you winning?" asked Madison smiling at her concentration.
"You bet!" she replied brightly, her wand moving rapidly over the table.
"In your dreams Haywood, this game is mine" said Tulip, looking just as focused as Penny.
"If we could just figure out a pattern for these changes, we could-" mumbled Rowan counting the remaining cards.
"No need" said Tonks, raising her wand "Just – be – fast!" She accentuated her every word with a sharp tap of her wand. "Yes! Three points to me! Who's winning now!" Leaning back in her chair, Tonks smiled at Madison "What's up?"
Madison shrugged "Not much." She cringed inwardly at the lie and added quickly "I actually wanted to talk to you guys."
"What about?" asked Tulip while moving closer to the table for her turn.
Madison heaved a massive breath and burst out "My mother contacted me yesterday evening through the fireplace. She said, that Jacob has not stopped or gone into hiding. She asked me to meet with him and warned me that if I did not, he might try and use you guys to force me. Also, she wants to meet with me herself to explain the prophecy to me. So...there's that..." she stopped talking and looked around the table. All the girls where staring at her with their mouths open. Before anyone could say anything, a loud bang made them all jump, and small bits of slightly smoking card pieces floated down on the table in silence.
"You can't meet with him! What is she thinking?" Penny was the first one to speak.
"She said that Jacob has to take the vaults magic from me" explained Madison.
"So it is in you after all?" quipped Tonks eagerly.
"I have no idea. I don't feel anything" shrugged Madison.
"What is there to explain about the prophecy?" asked Rowan, brushing away a crumpled card from her hair.
"Well – she said, that it includes me as well. Supposedly I have a part to perform as she put it."
Rowans brows furrowed "That's...unexpected..."
"What do you mean?" asked Madison.
"Well...it might explain what is actually going on. I mean, if you are mentioned in the prophecy, then there might be some method to this

madness so to speak. Maybe you were meant to go to the vaults with Jacob from the start."
"Or the part she's meant to perform is to play Isaac to Jacobs Abraham!" said Penny angrily. When she saw, that no one seemed to understand what she was talking about, she exclaimed "She wants her to let Jacob kill her!"
"I don't think so" intercepted Madison "She seemed to think, that Jacob was only after the magic. She got angry when I said, that he might kill me. Besides, that's not the point. She said, that Jacob might start using you to get to me."
"I'd like to see him try" growled Tulip lowly and Penny nodded at her side.
"Well I wouldn't" said Madison, panic now growing in her stomach "This is not why I told you guys. I told you so that you could be extra careful and not take any risks...maybe stop visiting Hogsmeade and-"
"No way! Nuh-uh, not happening!" said Tonks "Thanks for the warning Madison, but since I've never even met your brother, he's not going to scare me away from Zonkos."
"Yeah Madison, maybe you're overreacting" said Rowan softly "Tonks is right – none of us have met Jacob. I really don't see how he could-"
"He's a legilimence!" bellowed Madison loudly "He's been in my mind, sifted through my memories like browsing a book. Don't you think that he might be aware that you are in my life? Of how much you mean to me?" No one said anything for a few seconds. Madison slumped back into her seat and hung her head “Don’t you understand? You know what he has done – Beatrice, Malcolm Rook, Grace Harpis, my father...He doesn’t care what happens to anyone but himself. I can’t be the reason he uses to hurt any one of you.” She rolled her shoulders and looked up pleadingly. “Please...can you just be careful? I’m sorry about all of this, I truly am. But until Jacob is captured or dead...” she halted for a moment and swallowed “Until then – can you watch your backs?”
Tulip inspected Madison for a moment with an appraising look and then raised her hands in apparent agreement. Rowan just nodded solemnly and so did Tonks, muttering “Alright.” Penny didn't say anything, but took Madisons hand in her own and gripped it gently. “Thank you!” sighed Madison in relief.

The next three days were arduous for Madison. She felt constantly torn between wanting to keep an eye on her friends and sitting in the Gryffindor common room watching the fire for signs of her mother. Regrettably for her, the weather had turned and sun was blazing over the grounds of Hogwarts. The wind had lost its bite and the mud dried, leaving room only for everything fresh and green. The

quidditch pitch was almost constantly full of students, all the teams were practicing with renewed vigor and everyone else were either watching them while laying on the grass or participating in a friendly when the field was free. That meant, that Madison could find both Tonks and Charlie there most times, but Tulip and Rowan were not so obvious. She sighed in relief when dinnertime arrived and all of her friends were near her. Fortunately, Penny seemed as reluctant to stay away from Madison as she was from her, although Madison suspected, that their motives were a bit different. She guessed that Penny thought that she might go after Jacob alone, even with her recent promise. Despite their reactions, Madison saw that none of her friends took Cassias warning seriously. She had to admit to herself, that if she were in their shoes, she might not have done so either. It was difficult to imagine an attack by a dark wizard while the school was full of sunlight and laughter and homework was the only perceivable annoyance.

Madison and Penny had argued the night after she had told her about Cassia. Penny insisted that she go and talk to Dumbledore but Madison was reluctant to do so for many reasons. Primarily, she wanted to know more about the prophecy and knew that the headmaster was more than likely to ban her from any contact with her mother. In addition, Madison already knew what Dumbledore would say to her news. He would council patience and trust in aurors and might even add new constraints to Madisons routine. She didn't want to risk that and so she and Penny had bickered, until Rowan had paused their spat with the information that Dumbledore wasn't present at the school. She had heard professor Flitwick mention his absence to Trelawney. Madison had grinned triumphantly and Penny dropped the subject grudgingly for the time being.

Chapter 46

Madison was walking speedily towards the great hall. She had just finished her charms lesson and was about to meet Penny for lunch when she heard someone calling her name.
“Hey Steward!” Turning around, Madison saw Merula walking behind her.
“Merula? What’s up?” she asked, not stopping completely.
“What do I look like to you?”
“What do you mean?” asked Madison, only half-paying attention in her hurry.
“Do I look like an owl to you?” asked Merula.
“An owl? What are you talking about?”
“Can you stand still for a moment?” The anger in Merulas voice made Madison stop impatiently.
“I’m in a bit of a hurry” she huffed.
“Oh you have things to do? Funny, so do I. So in the future, don’t assign me as your friendly neighborhood postman!” She shoved a small envelope into Madisons hands.
“What is this?” she asked perplexedly looking at the parchment which had her name scribbled on it in tiny elegant handwriting.
“That’s something you should know better than me. I got a letter during morning post but when I opened the envelope, it had a smaller envelope inside it with your name on it” said Merula, rolling her eyes.
“Oh..OOohh” suddenly Madison understood what was going on. Cassia hadn’t said how she would contact Madison again. She had presumed that it would be via the floo network again, but apparently her mother had found another way.
“Thank you!” she muttered not looking at Merula and started walking towards the hall again, fumbling with the letter.
“Thank you?!” exclaimed Merula raising her eyebrows, but when Madison just kept on walking, she turned her back, grumbling audibly “Arrogant dolt!”

Madison opened the letter with trembling fingers. It was very short, containing only one sentence.
“Tonight, at the lakeside, behind Hogsmeade station.”
The letter was not signed, but Madison recognized her mothers writing though she must have written this in a hurry, the letters lacked their usual poise and sense of superiority. The apparent urgency emanating from the few words on the parchment took hold over Madison and she stopped near the entrance to the great hall. Shoving the letter into her pocket, she stood quite still for a few

moments, trying to think. The constant stream of passing students didn't help her concentration and clenching her hands into fists, she walked briskly into the hall and looked around. As usual during the past week, her friends had gathered in a group at Gryffindor table.
"How was charms?" asked Tulip when she sat down next to her.
"The usual" she replied, shoveling massive amounts of food on her plate.
"You ok?" inquired Penny with a suspicious look. Madison plastered a smile on her face and willed her foot to stop bouncing under the table.
"Yeah, of course. Everything's fine" she answered.

This was the first time Madison wasn't happy that Penny shared her bed. Sneaking away after bedtime wasn't a viable option, she might wake her. She decided to leave for the Hogsmeade station before that. This plan had the added bonus that she might be back without anyone knowing she had been gone at all. So after dinner, Madison pretended to go to the room of requirements to train. When she was sure that no one she knew was around, she bolted towards the astronomy tower. She had stashed her broomstick there beforehand, covering it with a concealment charm just in case. Flying to Hogsmeade seemed to be her best option. Filch would lock the gates soon and she had no idea how long she would be away. Besides, Dumbledore had banned her from leaving school grounds and she was sure that Filch was aware of that.
She flew straight up towards the clouds. She sun hadn't yet disappeared completely behind the forest and she was wary of being seen from the windows of the castle. Speeding upwards, she felt the warm wind on her face and gripped the handle of her broom tightly. The exhilaration, she usually experienced while flying did nothing to dispel the feelings of guilt and apprehension she had felt since she had made her decision after reading her mothers note. She knew that Penny would be angry with her, most likely joined by Rowan, Tulip and Tonks. However, that knowledge didn't make Madison doubt her choice. There was no way she could not go and meet her mother, not when there was a chance Cassia could help her with Jacob. She knew how she would have felt if she had stayed behind the protective walls of Hogwarts – like a coward, hiding behind others, leaving them to deal with her problems. Jacob was after all her problem, in spite of everything, he was her brother and it was her family who had brought this menace to light. She cringed, feeling shame about lying to Penny, but knew also that there had been no other way. She would have either tried to stop her from going or wanted to come along and neither of these results were options Madison was willing to take.
She circled slowly towards Hogsmeade, keeping a healthy distance

from the castle. The sun was slowly sinking now and the light was changing into blueish hue of spring evenings.
Madison landed near the lake and stashed her broom under some shrubbery. The evening scenery of Hogsmeade was breathtaking as always. No matter how many times she saw the setting sun glittering on the surface of the lake, it never failed to make her smile. The air was quiet and still, further injecting Madison with much needed composure. Pushing her windswept curls away from her face, she started walking cautiously towards the Hogsmeade station. Curiosity about the prophecy had been burning inside her ever since Cassia had mentioned it and she felt exhilarated with the expectation of knowledge, of understanding.
The shadowy form of the station building was barely visible, when Madison stopped. She had an eerie feeling that someone was watching her.
“You came.”
Madison jerked violently and grabbed her wand from her sleeve. Cassia appeared a few steps from her, throwing back a lofty cloak that had been covering her graceful frame.
“I’m glad. I was afraid my letter wouldn’t reach you in time” she added, folding her cloak neatly in her arms. Madison just stared, her heart still beating rapidly from the sudden appearance.
“It would be polite to greet me” marked Cassia dryly after a few moments of silence. Madison kept glaring at her, but lowered her wand. Her mother looked pristine as ever. It seemed that life as a fugitive did nothing to change her elegant attire, though her face had more lines than Madison remembered from their last meeting.
“Hello” she said quietly. Cassia frowned and took a few steps away from Madison.
“You have nothing more to say? I would have thought that you have questions.” She looked around and sneered subtly. It was clear, that she didn’t feel comfortable with their surroundings, no furniture or other comforts to distract her.
“I do. I have many questions” nodded Madison. “Why did you come here?”
Cassia raised her eyebrows “Did I not make myself clear during our last talk? I came to make sure that you understand your role in this mess we find ourselves in.”
“So you came to convince me to meet Jacob?”
“Yes” answered Cassia with a frown, looking like this was obvious.
Madison felt anger surface from within her “So this is still all about getting Jacob his precious powers? Even for you? I knew that father would-”
“Don’t be so dramatic!” interrupted Cassia with a calm voice. “I came

so I could help put an end to this madness. And I know my son – the only way to end this is for the two of you to finish what you started, it's as simple as that."
"As simple as that?" Madison laughed bitterly. "You really have no idea do you? You are as clueless as dad. He took your hair for the polyjuice potion, did you know that? When him and Jacob dragged me inside the last vault to use me as an offering."
Cassia turned towards the lake "Silver was foolish. He always was too impatient for his own good. Seeing Jacob like that...it made him lose focus. I tried to tell him, but..." her sentence faded and she remained half-turned from Madison, standing perfectly still and poised, looking at the setting sun.
"What did you try to tell him?" urged Madison, stepping towards her mother, now eager for answers.
Cassia cleared her throat and faced Madison, looking her in the eye for the first time.
"Silver didn't care much for history and legends. He was always more concerned with the present. Jacob takes after him and it has proven to be a grave mistake. The prophecy about the vaults is the real reason I came her tonight."
"What about it? What does it say?" Madison could feel the tension in herself reach its peak, her need for answers had grown almost unbearable.
"Silver and Jacob never saw the need to try and analyze the original text too deeply. They were content with the commonly accepted interpretation and took it as such. I on the other hand, thought the legend worthy of more profound evaluation. I spent a long time tracking the original recording and piecing it together. Even now I am not sure that I have managed to recreate it in full...still – it was my conclusions from the legend that I was trying to make Silver understand, but...I was too late. I brought the text of the original prophecy with me for you to read. I hope this will make you understand that you can not ignore Jacob for much longer." Cassia pulled a piece of parchment from inside her cloak pocket and handed it to Madison. It contained something that resembled a poem at first glance, written out in Cassias tiny elegant handwriting.

Do not open ye week of blood,
Do not enter in search of power!
Those whose veins are soiled with mud
Inside will spend their final hour.

Only the one from the sacred order.
Only the one from a righteous birth.
They are the one who can cross our border,

They, who have proven their solemn worth.

Inside you will find the magic you seek.
But only if your claim is whole.
Be it head or heart – neither can be weak.
There must be balance inside your soul.

Nothing can be taken, if not willingly given.
Nothing can be gained by the means of one.
By the strength of heart, the head will thriven,
Combine the two and you are done.

Madison stared at the words on the parchment for far longer than it took her to read them. This was it, the reason behind Jacobs attempts to break inside the vaults, the years her father spent training him, the years Madison herself had spent in search of her brother. Suddenly she felt laughter bursting from her lips.
“This is it?” she guffawed. “This little ditty is what father and Jacob have been chasing? It could mean anything. This is so...” she had to stop to gather her breath, the absurdity of her situation was ringing in her mind and her nerves felt raw with years full of tension. “This is so stupid!” she finally exclaimed, her laughter subsiding into snickering.
Cassia did not look amused. In fact, she looked angrier by the second.
“I am disappointed Madison. I thought you had begun to take this seriously, it seems I was mistaken.” She snapped the parchment back from Madisons hands and stuffed it hastily inside her robe.
“This is not a game. Your brother has devoted his whole life in-”
“That’s what’s so stupid!” cried Madison, her mirth fading completely now. “Can’t you see how demented this is? Jacob has not devoted his life, he has wasted it. And you and father helped him do it.”
“You of all people know it has not been a waste!” hissed Cassia, anger evident in her voice. “You have witnessed the power of the vaults firsthand, you were there!”
“Yes! And it was awful! The magic Jacob seeks? It is nothing more than a hunt to conquer others, to dominate everyone else. He is mad! I don’t know anymore if he always was or if the vaults made him like this, but this is what has happened to your son. He wanted to kill a little eleven year old girl to get more power. He sucked the magic out of his own father and two other innocent bystanders. And he wants me, his own sister dead. All of this just so he can be more powerful. How on earth can you not see how insane he is?” Madison was panting slightly. She felt a little desperate with the need to see that her mother at least was not so lost as her father had been, to have at least one member of her family she could relate to on some level.
Cassia was also breathing heavily, although she didn’t say anything

immediately after Madisons outburst. She closed her eyes and sighed deeply, the muscles in her jaw clenching visibly. With a forced calm, she finally spoke “We can not change the past. All we can do now is look to the future and deal with the situation as best we can. Jacob is after you, that is certain. I brought the prophecy to you so you would understand why. It says, that nothing can be taken if not willingly given. You must let Jacob take the magic of the vaults from you, you must!” Her voice wavered a little and she made a move with her hand as if to hold Madison, but then simply tucked her hands underneath her coat. “If you deny him, he will not relent. If you resist, you will only prolong the inevitable. Let him take what he needs and we can all move on.” Her voice sounded almost pleading to Madison, though her posture remained distant and haughty.
“But what will happen then? What do you think Jacob will do after he gets what he’s after? Do you think he will just say thank you and move on? Get a job and live a normal life? He’s already a danger to everyone and he has proven that causing harm to others means nothing to him. How can I let him gain even more power than he already has. I can not, you must see why I can not.” It was Madisons turn to plead with her mother. “I thought you came here to help me stop him, to give me some sort of advice or-”
“This is exactly why we are in this mess! You have always valued others higher than your own family. You have no loyalty Madison! Where is your honor, your integrity?” spat Cassia, stepping away from her once more.
Madison looked at her mother for a moment and then closed her eyes. She felt like a large stone had fallen inside her stomach, pulling her down with its weight. She exhaled heavily and looked at her again mournfully.
“I guess we have different views on what honor means then” she spoke quietly, all strain gone from her voice, leaving only the heaviness of fresh grief. Cassia only scoffed at that, already turning away from her. “I see now that my coming here was foolish. I won’t keep you longer. Goodbye Madison!” she said, keeping her gaze on the lake again.
“Goodbye” whispered Madison and turned around, walking slowly back to the bushes that guarded her broom.

Walking back towards the lakeshore, Madison saw that the sun had finally fallen behind the dark forest and the last remnants of light were quickly fading. She picked up her pace, thinking of Penny and her bed, wanting only to get back unnoticed if possible. She was defeated and somber. She had kept a small flicker of hope alive ever since Dumbledore had said to her, that her mother didn’t participate

in her kidnapping during the spring ball. Cassias last words had extinguished that hope. Her mother seemed to harbor the same kind of blind faith towards their family legacy that she had encountered with Jacob and Silver. Feeling lonelier than ever, Madison searched for her broom impatiently – she felt the need to be close to Penny and drown herself in the warmth that the golden haired girl seemed to almost radiate.

“Leaving already?”

Madison froze hunched over the bushes. Her heart skipped a beat and her breathing slowed down to almost ceasing completely.

“And here I thought we could have a nice family-reunion. Well excluding dad of course.”

Madison straightened herself and turned towards the voice.

“Jacob.”

“Hello sister.”

Chapter 47

Inexplicably, Madison felt no immediate panic seeing Jacob in front of her. She surveyed her brother with something akin to almost relief. At first glance, the young man looked the same as ever, tall and fierce, his black hair shining faintly under the rising moon. Madisons body succumbed to memories and for a split second the impulse to run to him for a hug made her jerk imperceptibly. The reality wasn't far behind however, and she narrowed her eyes, looking at Jacobs face with scrutiny. His features were familiar, but there was something foreign about him. His skin had a wax-like quality, it looked stretched too tightly, almost like a mask someone would wear to a costume party. There was something else different as well - the air around him pulsated with unseen magic, Madison could feel it encompassing her, the hair on her nape stood up and she noticed her wand growing warmer in her sleeve like a warning. The sensation of power rippling from Jacob was so strong that Madison was surprised that she hadn't felt him approaching beforehand.

"I'm pleased you came, I thought you might choose to stay in hiding." Jacob smiled at Madison almost amicably. He had his hands in his pockets and he looked completely relaxed. For some reason, Madison found this tranquility even more disconcerting than the maniacal ravings she had come to expect from him.

"So you and mom planned this?" she asked, bracing for the predictable sting of betrayal.

"No. I have been following her for days. I knew she would make a move eventually. I figured she was my best chance to find you out of that castle" shrugged Jacob.

"I was right" he added, smiling again.

Madisons brain was working in overdrive. She hadn't moved an inch, but she could feel her muscles tensing slowly. There was no urgent alarm or panic in her, but a steady preparation for what she knew was coming.

"So she didn't know you would be here?" she asked, just to be sure.

"No. She came on her own. I gather she tried to make you come around? I could have told her it's useless. I know now, that you are more stubborn than we thought." The crinkle in Jacobs eyes accompanying his smirk was almost too much for Madison. The silent amusement visible on his face was too familiar, too present in her recollections to disregard. The grief she felt for having to omit her mother as an ally was doubled over a fresh reminder of a lost brother. The scenes of her childhood, she had recently witnessed with Snape, rose again in her mind, and she saw Jacob as he had been for most of

her adolescence – her only friend and the one who she trusted with everything she had. Wanting to prolong the inevitable, Madison made no movement and kept looking at Jacob, relishing in his simple, everyday appearance, securing his smiling face into her memory.
“Scared?” asked Jacob, still maintaining his casual display.
“No” Madison shook her head with a small smile of her own. “Sad” she muttered quietly.
Jacob chuckled softly and shook his head “There’s no need to be sad. You should be grateful and proud, but not sad. Afraid. But not sad.”
Madison looked him in the eyes and felt her pulse quicken – the smile present on his lips was missing from his eyes.
“You sound exactly like dad. Be proud…” she muttered hopelessly, lowering her head to stare at the ground between her and Jacob. She knew there was nothing she could do now. No one knew where she was and she was glad for that small blessing, Jacob would attack or even kill anyone who dared disturb them, of that she was sure. Every word Jacob uttered, made her insides ache, but in a weird way, she needed to hear him. She wanted to be absolutely sure her brother was gone before she finally let him go and give in.
“Hrmph! Silver is a fool. He talked big when I was younger. But in the end he was a hypocrite. He wasted so much time trying to find a cure for me. Searching for a dragon, taking its eyes…all the while when I was telling him what I needed. He was weak, just like everyone else.”
“Why does that make him weak?” asked Madison frowning slightly.
“He only did it so he wouldn’t have to involve you. He was an old sap. At least he served some purpose in the end.” Jacob tilted his head and the corner of his lips curled slightly “So will you dear sister.”
Cold sweat started running down Madisons back and she gulped, feeling her hands starting to shake. As much as she had thought about this moment during the last weeks and months, she didn’t feel prepared. Hearing the sound of her own heartbeat in her ears, Pennys face flickered behind her eyes and filled her with immense remorse and sorrow. There was so much left unsaid, so many things she had wanted to do. The past year with her seemed like a fleeting moment from a sunny day. It was not enough, she wanted more, she should have said more to Penny. Regret bloomed in her and made her eyes prickle. She rubbed her hand over her face and took a deep breath, there was no use in falling to pieces now, she had to face her brother and she needed to do it with all the pride her family thought she didn’t possess.
“Well then – what are you waiting for?” she asked, glad to hear her own voice sounding much steadier than she had thought. Slowly, she reached for her wand and raising it, placed one foot behind her for support. “Get on with it.”

“Going to resist?” asked Jacob, pulling his hands from his pockets.
“What’s the point, we both know I’m going to win.”
“This isn’t about winning” answered Madison. “It’s about fighting. And I’m prepared to do just that.”
Jacob started circling her casually, still not reaching for his wand. “It would be much easier for you if you didn’t.”
“Nothing can be taken, if not willingly given” whispered Madison more to herself than to her brother.

Jacob blinked and a small puff of air passed over Madisons face. She never saw her brothers wand. She wasn’t even sure that his hands had moved. Her own hands did move however – they were slowly forced apart, away from her body. She could dimly ascertain, that she was rising up from the ground, her limbs wide apart like a stick figure drawn by a child. Her wand was still in her hand, the wood radiating with warmth against her sweaty palm, but she could not move a finger. She felt like she was inside a current of magic emanating from below her. Suddenly Jacobs fingertips appeared on the outskirts of her vision and she realized that he had moved behind her, circling her head with his hands.
“I'm taking what's mine” he growled in a low voice into her ear and almost instantly Madisons eyes flashed white with a stab of pain in her head. She wanted to close her eyes against it but couldn’t. Every muscle in her body trembled with a reaction that they could not follow, she had never felt so rigid. The pressure was immense, like being squished from all sides, invisible walls slowly constricting until she would inevitably explode. Stinging pangs of pain burst inside her brain periodically, gathering momentum with every turn. Madison saw that her body had started moving slowly, her and Jacob were revolving in sync with each other. She saw the lake and then the dark forest where the sun had gone down. Her mother had been there just minutes earlier. For a second, she felt glad that she had come to meet Cassia, underneath all the anxiety and anger about Jacob, she had wanted to see her, even if they were disappointed in each other. Madison strained her muscles again to try and free herself, but saw the futility in her attempt at once, Jacobs magic held her tight like invisible shackles. Instead, she focused on keeping her thoughts inside her - it had started to feel like they were being drained from her mind. She had trouble fixating on anything concrete, feeling fuzzy and disoriented, like someone had taken a big spoon and stirred it around inside her brain.
Jacobs fingers around her head hovered so close, they were almost touching her hair. They felt like magnets, pulling at the edges of Madisons mind. She heard sparks crackling and felt her hair rise. She

wondered briefly if the sound was her own magic leaving her, or Jacobs magic working in her. He didn't say anything, but she could hear him panting and felt his breath hit the back of her head. Out of a corner of her eye, she saw a small black figure fly over the dark forest, too far for Madison to discern it's shape. Might have been one of Hagrids hippogriffs she thought fleetingly. Like a flash, a memory of Charlie flying above the trees, wafted over her. It was hard to hold on to the memory, the pictures wavered in her minds eye and she couldn't place the recollection. Directing all the strength she had into gathering her flashback, she tried to piece it back together. What were they doing? Why was she flying in the Forbidden forest during nighttime? She felt the answer close to her, like a sneeze about to explode.

A dragon! There had been a dragon! And Charlie had wanted to see it.

Relief flowed over her, it felt important somehow that she had remembered. The pressure around increased and she heard Jacob grunting. His fingers moved almost imperceptibly closer and a strong stab of pain shot through Madison. Ignoring the spasms in her head, she refocused quickly on the memory, feeling instinctively, that it was the right thing to do. She had seen her father that night. He had been there, trying to catch the dragon. Jacob said that he was weak for wasting so much time, but he had only done it so he wouldn't have to use Madison. A gush of unexpected warmth filled Madison at the thought, and almost instantly, she felt the pressure give way around her. Her father had tried to spare her, he had wasted months to find an alternative solution. She knew, that it didn't make up for Silvers mistakes or absolve his behavior. It didn't mean, that he loved her or even liked her. She knew what he thought of her and was sure that he had meant every word of what he said to her during his trial and before that. But even so, the fact that he had tried, made Madison feel...something. That something fluttered inside her and made her lighter with each passing second. She heard Jacob growl in frustration and mutter something behind her, but he seemed to be struggling now. Madisons fingers twitched and she moved them slightly, testing them cautiously. She grasped her wand, and strained her hand to cast a spell, any spell, to break the binds around her. Before she could raise her hand however, her limbs were frozen once more. This time however, it felt very different, there was no pressure or pain. The warm fluttering in her grew and spread throughout her whole being and her body started to drift away from Jacobs. She revolved around to face him and saw that he too was frozen in mid-air like herself. His face was distorted in rage, his eyes were wide and bulging, sweat was pouring down his forehead. There was surprise and fear, mixed with anger in the glare he shot towards Madison. She looked back at him,

just as confused as shocked as he seemed to be.
Seconds passed in silence, with both of them hovering in the air completely immobile. Madison had no idea what was supposed to happen, she had her wand in hand, but she still had no control over her limbs and felt only the pleasant, but bewildering warmth in her grow. Jacob was obviously in a similar situation, his hands were raised in front of him, fingers spread just like when Madisons head had been between them seconds ago. Memories surfaced again, clear as day in Madisons mind but she no longer had trouble grasping them, on the contrary – they rose as vivid as the sight that was before her eyes and she felt like she could somehow see them all at once. The dragon and her father, Charlie flying, her childhood with Jacob, scenes from Hogwarts, London, the ocean, transfiguration class, Peeves, Rowan, Hogsmeade, a clearing in the woods, Cassia, her friends. Penny. Everything and everyone stayed before her, her whole life presented together like someone had stacked the days and months and years on top of each other and made them blend into one scene. She remembered that before death, ones life will flash before their eyes and wondered fleetingly if she was about to die, but found that she couldn't make herself take the thought too seriously. It was warm and tranquil seeing her life before her like that, it only made her want to smile. The exact instant the thought occurred to her, she found that she could – she felt her hands fall beside her and her shoulders sloped slightly, feeling returning into her body and her muscles relaxed. The warmth in her expanded and for a moment she started to worry that it would be too much to hold, but then she burst. It was the most peculiar feeling she had ever experienced. It felt as though she was overflowing, like a well during spring floods. The warmth spilled and spewed from her fingertips, her face, her chest, her legs. She was the warmth that was now cascading from her. The air around Madison and Jacob crackled with sparks and small golden lights appeared around them, moving from Madison towards her brother. There were few in numbers at first and moved slowly, but soon there were so many of them, that they formed lines, becoming indistinguishable. The grass glowed underneath them and the shore of the lake was so illuminated that Madison could distinguish stones and plants in its bottom. Suddenly she felt herself descend towards the ground and with a quick glance at her brother, saw that he too was sinking steadily lower.

Chapter 48

The moment her feet touched the ground, everything dissolved – the golden lights disappeared and Madison found herself in complete darkness. She couldn't see anything and shivered slightly, suddenly feeling the chill from the night air. Squinting and blinking, her eyes growing accustomed to the abrupt change, she tried to make out the shape of her brother who she knew must be but a few feet from her. A flash of red burst from the darkness and she felt a sharp sting on her cheek. Stumbling back a few steps, she quickly flashed her own wand and raised a protective shield. The light from her spell glowed silver and in its glimmer, Madison finally saw Jacob. He was standing still, looking at her with wide eyes. His wand was in his hand now, pointing at her, its tip wobbling slightly.
"How did you do that?"
Madison gaped at him. She was taken aback that her brother was looking to her for explanations, after all – he was the expert on the vaults and everything to do with them.
"Do what exactly?" she asked, her voice trembling. Jacob didn't answer her, instead he very carefully took a step closer, almost as if he was wary of her. His eyes watched her inquisitively, full of doubt and confusion. He took another step and then another, starting to circle around Madison. She kept turning with him, keeping her wand pointed at his chest at all times. The shield she had conjured expired and they were draped in shadows again.
"You know what" said Jacob finally. He stepped slowly towards Madison, who stood rooted to the spot, muscles tensing again, fighting against the impulse to run.
"You thought about father and then..." Jacob moved even closer "How did you do that?" he asked again pointedly. The tension was too much for Madison and she broke eye-contact first, backing away a few steps. This seemed to bring Jacob out of his trance and he blinked as well. His left eye twitched and he shook his head.
"It doesn't matter. It doesn't mean anything. I'll still be the only one." He was talking to himself now, not looking at Madison. Still not understanding what was going on, Madison backed away even further, the feeling of panic rising rapidly. She missed the warmth inside her that had somehow made her feel whole and safe. Once again, she didn't even see her brothers wand move, but felt an immense surge of force against her chest. She staggered, but remained standing. Jacob was looking at her with wide eyes and this time Madison at least saw him raise his wand. A loud bang echoed in Madisons ears and she almost lost her balance. Her chest was aching now, like she had been

hit by a bludger. Coughing and spluttering, she saw that the grass was smoking slightly and brown patches had appeared under her feet.
“What? How?” whispered Jacob, his mouth hanging open, and lifted his wand high above his head. With a swift motion he whooshed his arm down and red sparks flew towards Madison. She threw herself to the side trying to avoid them, but was too late. Two of the red sparks had found their mark and Madison felt dull pain in her thigh and left hand. She scrambled to her feet, and finally finding her voice, bellowed in a coarse shout “Protego!” A huge silver shield erupted in front of her and not a moment too soon. Jacob had repeated his attack and a fresh wave of red sparks were hurtling towards her. When they reached her shield, they evaporated instantly and Madison drew a shaky breath. She glanced at her hand and saw that blood was dripping from the wound her father had made when he cut her to gain entrance to the last vault. Her trousers showed no sign of blood however and her thigh was only sore from the spell that had hit her. All of a sudden she ducked automatically, from the corner of her eye, she saw a giant blue orb hurl in her direction. It blasted into her shield and a gong-like sound resounded from the impact. The echoes rippled over the dark forest, growing fainter with every wave.
“This. Can. Not. Be!” shouted Jacob and sent a new curse with every word. Madison backed away instinctively, but her shield stopped every spell that her brother shot. Jacob cursed loudly and came running at her, his wand raised.
“Protego!” yelled Madison again in panic and a new shield rose between Jacob and herself with such force, that it knocked him off his feet. He stumbled and fell on his back, but kept his wand pointed at Madison. There was a brief moment of silence, both siblings were panting heavily, gaping at each other. Jacob rose slowly and raised his wand again, but made no movement to cast a spell. Madison chewed on her bottom lip and wiped the sweat off her forehead fevereshly, she had no idea what to do next. Jacob looked like a madman now, his eyes were glazed and twitching and his hair was sticking to his forehead. The tip of his wand started glowing green and Madisons heart skipped a beat. This could not be what it looked like. No protective shield could stop an unforgivable curse. If Jacob was truly going to cast one, she had to act now.
“NO!” a loud shriek made Madison jump in fright and look around frantically. Even Jacob broke his stare and turned his head around. A figure was running towards them through the shadows.
“Mom!” whispered Madison, her mouth hanging open.
“What are you doing? Stop it!” shouted Cassia not to her, but to Jacob. She looked completely frenetic when she reached them, her own wand clutched in her hand.

“Go away” said Jacob in a low voice and turned his gaze and his wand back at Madison.
“No! I saw you. You tried and failed. What are you trying to accomplish now? It’s over!” Cassia grabbed Jacobs arm and tried to pull it down. “Come on, we have to go!”
“I said leave!” bellowed Jacob and pushed their mother away ruthlessly.
“You couldn’t take it” shrieked Cassia, scrambling quickly back at Jacobs side. “You have to stop now, there’s nothing more you can do.”
“No!” shouted Jacob holding his mother off of him with one hand, his wand still pointed at Madison. “If I can’t have it, she won’t either.”
“No! This is not the way!” spat Cassia through gritted teeth, panting with the effort of trying to pull Jacob away. “She is your sister!”
“Leave!” roared Jacob, turning sharply towards Cassia and she was thrown high into the air, landing on her back with a dull thump, remaining crumpled and motionless on the ground.
“Mom!” yelled Madison and started to run to her. She only managed a couple of steps before she was again forced to throw herself to the ground to dodge another wave of red sparks shaped like arrows. Quickly she cast another shield, keeping her eyes on her mother. Another gong sounded and Madison whipped around to face her attacker. Jacob was sending curses and spells at her with such speed, that the air surrounding them was glowing almost as brightly as if it were daytime. A surge of fury flowed through Madison and for the first time in her life, she aimed her wand at her brother in real anger.
“Impedimenta! Reducto! Petrificus Totalus! Stupefy!” She yelled out spells that popped in her mind with no real plan or even proper aim. Seeing her mothers body out of the corner of her eye made her tremble with rage completely foreign to her. Jacobs wand flashed before him and he countered or dodged all of her attacks easily. Every spell he countered, made his face become more animated than before. It looked like he was starting to enjoy himself, a ghost of a smile reappeared on his face and his eyes gleamed with elation.
“Trying to protect mommy?” he sneered and sent a cloud of black smoke hurtling towards Madison. She cast another cover, but this time it didn’t stop Jacobs attack completely. A haze of dark vapor shot through Madisons shield and hit her right arm. Immediately, a deep chill ran through her side and her arm felt heavy and numb. Madison quickly switched her wand to her left hand and squeezed her fingers around the warm wood. The sharp sting she felt in her palm made her look at her hand. Blood covered her wand and trickled between her fingers, dripping slowly on the trampled grass-blades beneath her feet. The sight made Madison halt for a second – the feeling of fury dissolved abruptly, leaving behind only similar numbness that now

covered her right arm. This was not what she had wanted. In a split second she wholly realized, that she could not hurt her brother. After everything he had done, Madison could still not make herself attack Jacob with true malice. He had been her brother, her confidant, her friend for so long, that even now, when she knew what his intentions had been and what he had become, she could not raise her wand against him in earnest. The blood seeping from her palm, her mother laying unconscious on the ground, her father losing his magic, all the people Jacob had hurt – everything came crashing over her all at once. It seemed like only yesterday when Jacob had helped her steady herself on a toy broomstick, laughing at her wobbling attempts to gain balance. It didn't matter that he had changed, Madison understood, that she had not. He had been there for her, offering comfort and certitude and she could not force herself to let these memories go. She raised her head to look at the black-haired man before him and felt tears in her eyes. The final recognition that he was entirely lost to her, filled her with utter sorrow, leaving no room for anger or rage.
Jacob was breathing heavily, his eyes narrowed and suspicious. He too had paused for a moment when he saw Madison standing frozen her wand pointing limply to the ground.
"What are you doing?" he growled, but raised his hand again before Madison had a chance to answer. Another burst of black smoke broke away from his wand and flew towards Madison. She didn't even try to raise a shield this time. She felt more tired than she had ever felt in her life. All instincts to find cover and safety were gone, all fight had left her. She felt only deep, exhaustive sadness and made no effort to keep her tears inside anymore. The black smoke hit Madison square in the chest, but it didn't hurt. The spell passed through her without leaving any trace of harm. Too desolate to wonder about another magical mystery, Madison just kept looking at her brother with tears running down her face. Jacob blinked in confusion, but sent another spell in her way instantly. The outcome was the same – this time a purple light passed through her with no effect whatsoever. Wheezing and sweating more profusely than ever, Jacob raised both of his arms above his head and pointed his wand at Madison once more. The tip of his wand glowed green and she knew what was coming next.
"Jacob" whispered Madison at the same time as her brother, with a maniacal shine in his eyes, lowered his arms in a sudden slashing movement.
The very air around them froze. The certain death never completely left Jacobs wand but hovered half-way towards Madison for a second, before vanishing into oblivion. All sounds were suddenly muted around them and Madison could not even feel her own heartbeat that only seconds ago had been thumping wildly in her ear. Small golden

lights appeared from thin air around them and as before, started to collide with each other, forming glowing lines between her and Jacob. They exuded with unseen force that pushed back everything in their way expect the siblings standing in the middle of them. Half expecting to be immobilized again, Madison was surprised to realize, that she could move. Looking around, she saw that the golden lines started to radiate further away from them as they grew. The nearest trees swayed and bent so low, that she could see branches breaking and roots rising from the earth in slow motion, though she heard no sound of cracking or splintering. The water in the lake trembled for a moment as if there had been an earthquake and then started to move soundlessly further from the shore, rising in a huge tidal wave at the middle of the lake, remaining there, hovering in stand-still.
Madison looked around in awe - the air was glowing golden, the light originating from herself and Jacob. Her hands felt warm and she saw small sparks crackling and bursting, like a miniature firework, around her wand. A feeling of power started to spring from her chest, moving steadily all over her body and it felt like her every sense was becoming heightened. She looked at Jacob and saw that his hands were spread apart, his body rigid. His eyes stared at Madison, full of disbelief and confusion but he seemed unable to move. She took a tentative step towards him, expecting to become frozen like him at any second. Instead, her movement felt so fluid, that she had to look down, to check if her feet were still touching the ground. Seeing her feet on the grass, she took another step. It felt like she was moving underwater – every action came out in slow motion but at the same time she felt so light as if she were floating towards her brother. The feeling of power grew with every step she took and her wand felt almost too hot to hold when she was finally face to face with Jacob. Madison stopped in front of him, breathing slowly. His eyes were following her every movement, flicking back and forth from their surroundings. Little beads of sweat were dripping down his cheeks and neck, his ears were red and in stark contrast with his pale face. Not understanding how and not really caring either, Madison knew that she now held the power to destroy her brother. She was certain that if she wanted to, she could take his magic and his life from him. She could end it all, her fingertips tingled with magic and she knew that she only had to reach out to claim the most precious thing to her brother as her own. The surety of this knowledge made no difference to her, she was only prolonging this moment out of her own selfish longing.
Raising her arms, she closed her eyes briefly, sending out a silent plea that she was not making a huge mistake and pulled his rigid body into a tight hug. For a terrifying moment, Jacob didn't move a muscle and

Madisons eyes shot open. The golden lines emanating from them trembled in the air and burst suddenly into a million little grains that looked like swarms of fireflies. All sound came rushing back with a gust of wind and the silence was broken. A robust roar made Madison turn her eyes towards the lake and she saw the tidal wave starting to collapse. Before she could react or even close her eyes, they were both drenched in freezing water that spilled from the overwhelming force of the fall. Barely able to remain standing, Madison felt Jacob go limp in her arms. Shivering from the cold and the effort it took to hold her brother up, she heard a noise behind her. Not wanting to drop Jacob, she knelt and placed him gingerly on the ground before turning around. Cassia was limping towards her, slightly hunched and as soaked as they were. It seemed that the water from the lake had roused her.

“Mom?” muttered Madison dazedly.

“Did you kill him?” she asked with urgency, pressing a hand to her side before kneeling beside them.

“No! I...I didn’t...I...” Madison turned back to Jacob, starting to feel another wave of terror but Cassia pushed her aside and examined Jacob with swift but gentle strokes.

“You didn’t” she sighed in relief. “His knocked out. What did you do then? What happened?” she asked looking at Madison intently.

Still trembling from the icy water and the panic that she had accidentally killed Jacob, Madison opened and closed her mouth several times trying to find the words to describe what had happened.

“I hugged him” she finally said quietly, finding it impossible to explain the evening to her mother in its entirety. Cassia looked at her in silence and then placed her hand on Jacobs forehead.

“Did you take his magic?” she whispered, her eyes closed.

“I...I don’t know” admitted Madison. “I don’t know what happened. I didn’t try to take it” she added pleadingly.

Cassia pulled out her wand and glided its tip over Jacob slowly, muttering something underneath her breath. A small ball of silver slithered from her wand and started moving rapidly above him, darting from one place to another. After what felt like ages to Madison, the ball flew back inside her mothers wand and she let out a huge sigh.

“It’s gone” she said impassively. Madison slumped back and looked at her brother. He looked peaceful, like he was sleeping and though his face was still pale and there were dark circles under his eyes, he seemed somehow more familiar to Madison than before.

“What now?” The loaded question hung between them and filled the air with heaviness. Wincing with pain, Cassia straightened herself and brushed dirt from her clothes.

“I have to take him away from here. They will still look for him.”
“Take him where?” asked Madison getting up as well.
Cassia frowned “I don’t know yet. Somewhere where we won’t be bothered.” She raised her wand again and summoned her cloak that had remained behind. Madison looked at the cloak in her mothers arms and wondered how was it possible that it was still the same night when she saw her mother emerge from under it just hours ago.
“Ok” she said blankly. Cassia stood with her arms folded before her and looked down at Jacobs motionless body.
“Maybe it is for the best” she said. “He needs me now.” Madisons eyes widened in surprise and her mother turned to her, with a far-off look in her eyes. “You never did” she added with a distant smile. Before Madison could say anything, Cassia knelt again and pulled Jacobs limp form against her, throwing her cloak over both of them.
“I’ll write if I can” heard Madison right before a faint pop made it clear, that she was alone.

Chapter 49

The lake was still and quiet again, detaining no signs of the magical current that had passed through it. The water was slowly tingeing pink with the first few rays from the new sun rising. Madison looked around and finally plopped down on the soft grass facing the water. The trees hadn't recovered quite so effortlessly as the lake, there were branches and roots strewn around her with some stumps raised clear from the ground, their earthy underbellies facing the sky. Madison felt grateful somehow when she observed the destruction in the area, it was an indisputable proof, that something had indeed happened here. Without the trees and the scorched patches of grass, she might have thought that she had dreamed the whole evening or been sleep-walking. Her own body however served as another remainder that the events from the past hours were no dream – her left palm was bleeding, her chest and ribs ached and every single one of her muscles felt limp and useless.
This was it. She had done it, it was over. Jacob had lost his power, the vaults were truly destroyed now. These thoughts kept running around in her exhausted brain without taking root. It seemed dangerous to let herself fully believe them, premature somehow. But as minutes ticked by and nothing happened, belief and hope started to slowly seep in. This was really it – Jacob wasn't a threat anymore, no wizards or witches would lose their magic or worse to him. Her friends were finally safe and she could breathe again. A small smile that had started to form on her lips grew to a full blown laughter bubbling inside. She sat there, on the grass, with her hands around her knees chuckling quietly. She would have whooped and jumped with joy if she had any strength left, but for now, she just sat there, feeling the utter and complete bliss of relief and hope bloom in her. A completely new world started to open up – thoughts or future after Hogwarts, of choices and opportunities, of a new life – flowed cautiously through her. And the brightest and clearest thing she saw in her rampant thoughts was Pennys face. Her shining blue eyes were the one thing that didn't leave her mind even for a moment. Suddenly it occurred to her, that she had to get back to the castle. She needed to tell Penny what had happened, she had to share the feeling of her newfound freedom immediately. Besides, if she woke up and found that Madison was not there, she would worry and she had done that enough for a lifetime in Madisons opinion. Closing her eyes briefly, she heaved a huge happy sigh and pushed herself off the ground. A new morning had dawned, the air was crisp and fresh and she was free. Still smiling, she opened her eyes and turned towards the castle. Jerking

violently, she raised her wand again, almost toppling over from fright.
“I do apologize. I simply though it unkind to disturb your thoughts at this moment and decided to give you some time.” Dumbledore was standing not twenty feet from her, grinning mischievously.
“Shit!” muttered Madison, pressing a hand on her chest, feeling her heart hammering against her fingers. “Oh! Sorry professor!” she puffed hastily after realizing what she had said and lowered her wand again.
Dumbledore chuckled, looking amused “Although I do not condone profanities, I do understand that there are certain circumstances where one may be excused for indulging.” His smile disappeared from his face and was replaced by a more pragmatic expression. “How are you feeling?”
Madison looked at him and her smile returned slowly “I’m fine.” She had repeated these words so many times on numerous occasions, but had never meant them so thoroughly before.
“How are your injuries? I can see that you are hurt.”
Madison shook her head dismissively “Nah, it’s nothing major. Just some scrapes and- Wait! What are you doing here? How did you know I would be here?”
Dumbledores gaze scanned her quickly before his posture relaxed slightly and he replied “I sensed you. That is to say, I sensed the magical occurrence in the vicinity on my way back to the school.” When he saw the confused look on Madisons face, he added “Magic leaves traces that can be followed. Powerful spells leave imprints that can be sensed by other wizards and witches even years later. You and your brother were, for lack of a better term, exuding very potent magic that I could not help to perceive even if I had tried to.” He coughed and strode closer to Madison “Although I must admit that I suspected something was going on when I saw half the lake rise up from Hogsmeade.” Dumbledore stopped in front of Madison and smiled down on her. After a brief pause while they stared at each other, Madison suddenly guffawed loudly. She bent over, holding on to her side, howling with laughter. Her muscles protested against the new strain, but she could not hold her mirth in and continued giggling unabashedly for several minutes. Dumbledore stood benignly at her side and surveyed the landscape around them while politely waiting for Madison to collect herself.
“I’m sorry professor” said Madison again, wiping her eyes.
“Never apologize for genuine joy Madison” replied Dumbledore serenely. “Now – I think explanations are in order. And for once I am the one requiring them, a welcome change I might add. Shall we head back to the castle or would you prefer we stay outside?”
“Castle I think” answered Madison thinking of Penny.

“After you then” smiled Dumbledore and gestured towards the path leading back to Hogwarts. They walked in silence for a while as Madison tried to gather her thoughts. Her mind was all over the place, jumping from elation to wonder to the vast amount of unanswered questions that had accumulated during the past night. When they passed through the doors to the entrance hall, Dumbledore turned towards the corridor leading to the hospital wing.
“Oh no professor, please can we go to your office?” pleaded Madison as soon as she realized where they were headed.
“Are you sure?” asked Dumbledore raising his bushy eyebrows at her.
“Yes! I feel fine, really” nodded Madison eagerly. She liked Madam Pomfrey very much, but funnily enough she didn’t associate the hospital wing with the happiest of memories and in her current exhilarated state, she had no wish to be brought back to reality so soon. During the past year she had visited the hospital wing so often, that if she never saw the tiled floors and crisp white beds again, she would count herself lucky. Dumbledore seemed to understand her and without pressing the matter further, changed their path towards the headmasters tower.

Dumbledores office was bathed in orange glow coming from the window. The sun was barely visible, but the light had found its way in. The portraits on the walls were dozing and the room was quiet except for the tranquil whirring of some magical instruments on the shelves. Madison sank contentedly into her usual seat and leaned her head back. She was exhausted, the adrenaline had left her body and her limbs felt heavy and limp.
Dumbledore paused briefly at Fawkes’s cage and mumbled something to the bird before taking place behind his desk. Without saying anything, he summoned two bottles of butterbeer from a cabinet behind Madison and handed one of them to her. When she quirked her eyebrows at him he smiled “This does not feel like time for tea don’t you agree?” Madison only beamed in response and took the offered bottle.

The light in the room had slowly shifted and Madison could see the sun gleaming above the forest when she finished telling the headmaster exactly what had happened during the previous night.
“And then I saw you. How long where you there by the way? How much did you see?” Madison turned her head back to Dumbledore.
“Not long. I arrived in time to hear your parting words” answered Dumbledore calmly.
“You didn’t think to stop them from leaving? I mean they are both still wanted by the ministry aren’t they?” asked Madison with some trepidation.

“No, the thought didn’t occur to me. I share your views on Azkaban and I do not think there is any merit in restraining Jacob in that place now that he has lost his magic. I’m sure you of all people understand as I do, that the very condition is the harshest punishment for him in itself. As for your mother…well I can’t see any real reason to confine her. Besides, I think Cassia was right when she said, that Jacob needs her now. More than ever in fact.” Madison nodded, deep in thought. She had known that Dumbledore would understand, but was grateful all the same. She shot a small smile to the headmaster to let him know how much she appreciated his care.
“You were right all along. You knew, even without the prophecy” she said.
“I had guessed your part in this tale yes” agreed Dumbledore. “But even so – I did not foresee this outcome. I admit, that I underestimated the magnitude of the magic Jacob tried to possess. I rather think that I would have tried to shelter you even more had I known.”
“Lucky you didn’t then” smirked Madison.
“Lucky?” Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. “One might think so yes. But I think we are all lucky on a completely different account.” Seeing Madison frown in confusion, he pushed his hands forward and leaned in closer to her.
“The vaults are destroyed and Jacob has been defeated only because of the remarkable, unique and rare nature you possess. Had the strength of your character and disposition been even marginally less singular, we might all still be in grave danger.”
Madison bowed her head and picked on the hem of her shirt “You mean my ability to love?” she muttered, feeling embarrassed all of a sudden.
“I do” confirmed Dumbledore, leaning back against his chair. “The very fact that during the most crucial moments of your young life, you have never let anger or hatred take hold over you. On the contrary – you have always turned to the deepest feelings of love you possess – towards your friends, your mother, your father, Miss Haywood and…your brother. This quality shows your true heart and is the reason we may all count ourselves as lucky.”
Madison didn’t quite agree with Dumbledore, but thought it impolite to argue, so she just shrugged and mumbled “Ok then.”
Dumbledores smile only grew “You are still young, I know it is difficult to understand, but you will come to realize during time, that even the most kindhearted and good-natured people find it hard to reveal love in themselves for others who show no such feelings towards them. It is human nature to love those who love us in return. It is easy, it is simple. It is much more challenging to love those who

have abandoned us or worse."
Madison frowned, feeling that Dumbledore was being somewhat pessimistic, but her head felt too heavy and sluggish to ponder about it for much longer. He seemed to understand her thoughts however as he continued "The prophecy your mother showed you tells the same tale. By the strength of heart, the head will thriven." When Madison only continued looking at him blankly, he chuckled "But there is no need for us to start dissecting the meaning of old foretellings, especially when you must surely be in need of some medical attention and then sleep I think?"
Madisons eyes shot wide open "Penny!" she exclaimed and sat up straight. "I have to get back to my room before she-" She stopped suddenly. "Not that she's in my room...She's in her own...I...I just have to get back." Blushing furiously, she stood and shuffled towards the exit.
"Not to worry. Breakfast hasn't started yet. Besides, I sent Fawkes to your dormitory with a message to Miss Haywood earlier. She will know to look for you at the infirmary." Dumbledore sounded almost giddy and Madison felt even more flustered when she mumbled her thanks before stumbling out the doorway.

Chapter 50

It was earlier than Madison had thought, the corridors were still abandoned and empty when she walked towards the hospital wing. She only heard Peeves singing loudly in the distance and some mutterings from the paintings she passed on her way. Madam Pomfrey however was awake and waiting for her, guiding her towards a bed as soon as she stepped through the doors. Madison guessed that Dumbledore had given her a heads up as well.
“It’s only my palm and my chest that hurts a little, I feel fine really” supplied Madison while Madam Pomfrey bustled around her with pillows and linen.
“I don’t need to stay in bed or even lay down really.” She still harbored hope, that she might get back to her dormitory unnoticed. When she received a particularly stern gaze from the dictatorial matron as her only response, she lowered her head and sat on the bed obediently. Madam Pomfrey took out her wand and narrowing her eyes, began her examination.
“Feel fine you say?” she scoffed when she was finished.
“Your wound has opened up on your left palm, you have a cracked rib, some unidentified spell damage in your chest and right arm and a cut on your cheek. You are staying here until I say so and I don’t want to hear another word about it.”
Madison sighed deeply but knew better than to dispute the already miffed healer any further. She hopped off the bed and started to remove her sneakers, when the door swung open with a loud bang. Penny stood at the doorway, looking frightened and out of breath. When she saw Madison, she let out a small choking sound and lunged across the room into her arms. Madison backed against the bed with the force of her hug and pulled her tight against herself ignoring the slight pain in her chest as best she could.
“I’m ok” she said quickly. “Everything is fine.” She shot Madam Pomfrey a pleading look over Pennys shoulder, imploring her with her eyes to give them a moment. The older woman looked disgruntled, but sympathetic all the same. She rolled her eyes at the couple still holding on to each other and went into her office, closing the door after her.
When Penny finally pulled away from Madison, she didn’t let go of her completely, holding on to her hands.
“What happened? Dumbledore wrote that you were here.”
“Didn’t he say that I was fine?” asked Madison frowning.
“He did, but how fine could you be if you were in the hospital wing? Besides – you are not fine, look at you!” Penny took a step back,

surveying Madison with watery eyes.
“What happened? Where were you? I thought you were training late again.”
“It was Jacob. He finally showed” explained Madison excitedly.
“But it’s alright – he lost his magic, he’s completely harmless now. It’s over. For good!” Pennys eyes widened and her mouth formed a small o-shape, Madison felt her hands tremble slightly in her own. Suddenly a frown formed on her flushed face and she let go of Madison, taking a small step away from her.
“You met Jacob?” she asked softly.
“Yes” nodded Madison.
“But it’s ok. Look at me – I’m fine. Well, I mean – I do have some scrapes, but it’s nothing. Madam Pomfrey will fix me right up and-” she stopped talking when she saw the expression on Pennys face.
“What’s the matter?”
“Did you go out to meet him?” Penny asked quietly and Madison finally understood.
“No! I swear I didn’t! I had no idea he would show up. I went to meet my mother, she wrote to me and asked for us to meet. Jacob only showed up when I was already on my way back to school” she explained in a hurry, anxious to clarify. Penny didn’t say anything and when she looked at Madison, her eyes were hard to read. She took a cotton pad from the bedside table and dabbed it gently over Madisons cheek.
“You’re bleeding” she said in a low voice.
“Never mind that now” Madison felt a little exasperated at how Penny didn’t seem to understand what this meant and grasped her hands again. She wanted her to experience the same joyful high as she herself did.
“He is gone. My mother took him to who-knows-where. We are free, we can do whatever we want now!”
Penny smiled at her affectionately “I think the first thing we need to do is call Madam Pomfrey back in here so she can heal you. And then I can hear the whole story.”
“But-” Madison protested.
“I’d rather listen to you while you’re not bleeding simultaneously if you don’t mind” said Penny coolly and went to call the matron.
Madam Pomfrey returned with several potions already at hand and shoved Madison on the bed decisively. Penny stood back and watched while she worked her wand over Madisons ribs, sitting down next to the bed only when Madison was gulping down the numerous potions the healer handed her. She healed Madisons ribs in minutes along with the small cut on her cheek but approached the damage in her chest and arm with apparent caution, muttering to herself and even

consulting a massive leather-bound book before bringing out a small vial containing a rusty colored liquid. The potion tasted like nothing Madison had tried before – the sweet smell of it eased her enough that she gulped it down in one go, but she was startled to discover, that the taste changed in her mouth. Rapidly alternating flavors, from acidic to peppery to honey, made her cough and splutter for several minutes. Penny handed her a glass of water and Madison almost inhaled it in her hurry to rid herself from the explosion going on in her mouth. Finally, with strict instructions to lay still for at least an hour until the potions worked, Madam Pomfrey left for her office again, leaving the two girls alone once more.
“Are you feeling better?” asked Penny tensely.
“Yes. I wasn’t that bad off before, but Madam Pomfrey really knows her stuff. That last potion though...bleh!”
“It was Mutatio mixture. Although from the coloring I think she infused it with Mandrake root” said Penny. Madison smiled proudly at her ability to dissect a potion from only sight.
“Well whatever it was, I don’t want refills.” Penny didn’t return her smile, instead she folded her hands on her lap and, looking at the floor, said in a voice, that sounded strange to Madisons ears “So tell me what happened last night.” Eager to share her joy, Madison launched into the tale. After having just finished talking about the same events with Dumbledore, she didn’t hesitate or stumble, the story flew out of her fluently and as she neared the end, her own excitement only grew.
“So you see – he’s gone! His magic is gone, the vaults – gone! It’s over!” she looked at Penny with hopeful eyes, clambering upright into a sitting position on her bed. “We don’t have to hide anymore! I can do- we can...” she didn’t finish her sentence, only letting out an exalted laughter. Penny regarded her and for a moment Madison thought she saw a flash of sorrow, but then she smiled and her face lit up, making her eyes sparkle. She got up and climbed on the bed, facing Madison.
“Yes, you can” she said softly before taking Madisons face between her hands and pressing her lips on hers. Madison smiled into the kiss and tried to pull Penny closer, but she pushed her away gently, ending the kiss sooner than Madison would have liked. The bright haze of happiness Madison had felt, ever since she left the lakeside, started to dim slightly when she felt Penny pull away from her.
“What’s the matter?” she asked with a frown.
Penny kept her eyes on the bed and only shook her head “Nothing.” Trying to catch her eyes, Madison stooped a little which made her wince and press a hand on her chest. Pennys eyes shot up and she clambered off the bed.

“Don’t move, remember what Madam Pomfrey said.”
“Penny – what’s wrong?” asked Madison again, ignoring her last statement.
“I’ll go and see if breakfast is ready yet. I’ll bring some, you can’t leave so soon anyway, alright?” said Penny not looking at her and already moving towards the exit.
“Penny!” said Madison again, a little louder. “Tell me” she pleaded, feeling fear rising in her like a tremor.
“It’s nothing. We’ll talk more when I get back ok? You need to rest and get better. I’ll be back soon” she answered, already at the door. With a soft thump, the door of the infirmary closed after her, and Madison felt like someone had let the air out of her balloon of happiness.

Staring at the ceiling and throwing anxious glances at the door, Madisons unease only grew with each minute. When Madam Pomfrey returned from her office, she almost started begging her to let her leave, before deciding against it. Her patience was rewarded, when she was proclaimed free to leave in an hour and handed one final potion. She drained the vial quickly and held out her hand for the healer compliantly. The bandages on her palm already needed checking and Madam Pomfrey muttered a spell over the wound before wrapping it tightly again.
“You need to change these bandages often, the wound is deeper than before. And you need to come back tonight so I can evaluate the effects from the potions” said the matron seriously.
“You are very lucky that the spell passed a defensive shield before hitting you, it could have been much worse.” Madison nodded and smiled gratefully at the older woman before turning her eyes back to the door. She didn’t have to wait much longer, loud voices could be heard from the corridor and the door swung open with another bang. A rowdy mass of people entered the room, all quickly circling around Madisons bed, leaving Madam Pomfrey spluttering indignantly behind them. Rowan, Charlie, Tulip, Ben, Tonks, Bill and Barnaby huddled close to her, all talking at the same time. Madison didn’t say anything at first, her eyes locked with the crystal blue ones she had been longing to see. Penny stood at her side, holding two large stacks of toast and looking at her with a small apologetic smile.
The third telling of the events with Jacob felt almost robotic to Madison. She was beginning to feel the effects of staying up all night along with the physical aches in her body. The elation she had felt previously was replaced by growing anxiety about Penny and she had to muster her resolve to hide it from her friends, keeping on a cheerful countenance throughout the chatter. But slowly the reactions from the

group listening her talk, raised her mood again. When she was finished, the hospital wing echoed with thundering sounds of whooping and cheering. Madison couldn't help herself and laughed along with them. The overwhelming glee around the bed was so palpable, that Madison thought they all looked like they had been drinking euphoria inducing elixir. When Penny climbed on the bed and snuggled against her, she felt like she would never stop smiling.

Chapter 51

Something was bothering Penny, that much was evident to Madison. Over the weeks after her meeting with Jacob, she became increasingly distant. Madison caught Penny watching her quietly with a somber look on her face on more than one occasion. When she tried to talk to her about it, she blamed it on the looming exams and changed the subject quickly. Unfortunately for Madison, the exams were indeed occupying every minute they had between classes. All the teachers were relentlessly piling homework on them and urging them to practice spells and incantations during the few breaks they had. With a heavy heart, Madison decided to wait until their exams were over to talk with Penny and submerged herself in her studies. The days slowed down and fused into one huge cramming session, spent mostly in the library. Even Tonks and Tulip didn't try to interrupt the monotone routine the group had fallen into, but huddled over dusty books and scribbled down dates and names they swore to forget the moment the exams were finished.
Madison was uneasy and even glad over the amount of studying she had to do. It kept her thoughts from running wild over Pennys remote behavior and gave her something to do. Finally the inevitable days of the exams came and went. Madison let herself become overwhelmed with the nervous excitement and the intense last-minute reviewings they brought. At times, she caught herself floating away from the humdrum of the everyday life in Hogwarts and thinking about Jacob, the magic of the vaults and her part in their story. Every time it happened, she quickly chided herself and doubled her focus on her schoolwork. These thoughts had to wait, this was not the time to let herself go. It did feel good however, to study together with her friends. Every hour spent discussing exam-questions and quizzing each other, made her feel more centered, more connected. For so long she had felt like an outsider, a visitor in her friends lives, always on a mission, running, searching for something foreign and unobtainable. So she soaked up every moment of mundane everyday normality she could.

Two hours before her last exam, professor McGonagall summoned Madison to her study. With her mind still trying to hold on to the incantation needed for hand-held flames, she knocked on her door.
"Enter!" came a brisk reply and she opened the door.
"Good afternoon professor!"
"Good afternoon Steward! Take a seat!" McGonagall sounded perturbed for some reason. Madison sat carefully on the stiff chair in

front of the table, going over her past behavior quickly in her mind to find a reason for her being summoned by her head of house. Had she maybe failed her transfiguration exam? Fortunately, McGonagall didn't leave her squirming for long.
"The reason I have called you in here is your inheritance" she looked up at Madison, her stony expression unwavering.
"My- what?"
McGonagall coughed softly and shuffled some papers on her desk.
"We've had a letter from the ministry concerning your future and living conditions." Madisons eyes widened – she had completely forgotten that she was still underage and in her parents custody. Her mouth went dry, but she didn't say anything, waiting for McGonagall to continue.
"Considering that both of your parents are..khmm...unavailable, the ministry officials started the paperwork to find a suitable solution to your problem." Here McGonagall paused for a moment and looked up from her desk. Her eyes softened when she saw the fearful look on Madisons face.
"The usual procedure is to find a foster family, or failing that – an orphanage, but-" Madison gulped audibly at the word orphanage. "-Dumbledore has talked with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and they have agreed that since you are already sixteen years old and not far from becoming of age, there is no need to find you a placement." Madison let out a sigh of relief and slumped in her chair.
"They have agreed that you can be regarded as an adult and conducted with in accordance to that view." McGonagall paused again and took up some papers, reading from them over her spectacles.
"The ministry has transferred the ownership of your family home to your name to help your situation, as your parents are no longer eligible. The same goes for your family account in Gringotts Wizarding Bank. Here is the paperwork confirming what I just read and the deed to your house." McGonagall handed the papers to Madison over the table. Madison looked at them in disbelief, not fully comprehending what she just heard.
"So does that mean that I'm...err...free to do what I want?" asked Madison slowly. McGonagall regained her stern look at once.
"In regards to your inheritance yes. But the allowance from the ministry does not mean that the other laws regulating underage witches and wizards don't apply to you anymore. The restrictions for underage witches and wizards are still to be followed until you reach the age of seventeen. This alteration covers only your possessions and the decision to reside alone if you so choose." Madison nodded mutely and clutched the papers in her hand. She had never thought about her

inheritance before. She didn't think about money or finances. Her parents were wealthy, she had gathered that much, but she had only envisioned leaving her parents house as soon as possible, figuring that Jacob would take over the family affairs when the time came. In hindsight, she had been foolish to forget about her custody, but thoughts about orphanages had never even crossed her mind. Feeling immense gratitude and relief, she looked at McGonagall.
"Thank you! I...I didn't really think about that stuff at all."
"That is understandable" nodded the stern witch benignly.
"You should thank Dumbledore, he persuaded the ministry that you have acted more maturely than your age would suggest. If you have any questions or concerns, the contact for the ministry official who handled your case is attached to the papers. And feel free to come to me if you need guidance or help in anything." McGonagall leaned back as far as her straight chair allowed and smiled at Madison.
"You are not alone, even if you are now legally independent."
Warmth spread through Madison and she beamed at the older witch
"Thank you very much professor!" Feeling bewildered and relieved by the influx of news, she got up and left the office. Walking back to the library, she felt the same sense of freedom pass over her she had felt when she sat on the lakeshore after her mother left with Jacob. Another piece of her life had fallen into place. A piece she herself had not considered, but an important piece all the same. Feeling lighter with every step, she almost started to skip on her way – she had to tell Penny her news. Immediately a wave of nerves crashed over her happiness. The unknown something that was going on with Penny clouded over everything else and Madisons strut slowed considerably.

„So I was thinking" started Madison when she and Penny passed the gates and strolled towards the lake after their last exam.
„Do you think your parents would allow you to come to London with me? I mean like for a weekend? I could show you around, I know the city quite well. We could stay at the Leaky Cauldron."
„Probably. I have to ask them of course, but I don't see why they would say no" answered Penny.
Her face was so stony, that Madison felt the need to ask „Do you want to go? We can visit some other place if you'd prefer. I just thought it might be fun to travel a bit, just the two of us."
„London sounds fine" replied Penny, kicking a small pebble with her toe.
There was no postponing this moment any more. Madison felt her palms grow a little sweaty, but her resolve increased. She needed to find out what was going on with Penny and there was no reason to wait any longer.

„Penny? I think we need to talk" she said gently and tugged her hand a little to get her to look up. She raised her head and a flash of worry passed over her when their eyes met.
„What about?" she asked quietly. Madison knew she was stalling, it was written all over her face.
„I think you know. You've been acting...strange. What's going on?"
„Nothing! I've just been focusing on the exams and-"
„Come on Penny. I know you said it was the exams, but I don't think that's completely true. Besides, the exams are over now and there is still something bothering you, I can tell. Why won't you tell me?"
Penny squirmed and dropped Madisons hand, turning her back to her. She took a couple of steps towards the lake and stopped. Madison remained silent, though her heart continued to pound nervously against her chest while she waited.
Finally Penny whispered „I'm sad."
Madisons heart sank. "What? Why?"
Penny didn't answer her right away. It looked like she was having a hard time finding the right words. She fidgeted with her bag and ran her hand through her hair several times. Finally she turned to Madison and added "And I think I'm a little angry."
"At me?" asked Madison raising her eyebrows.
"Yes" nodded Penny, her face now firm.
"Why?"
Penny took a deep breath "You didn't tell me your mother had written to you the night you went out. In fact you lied to me on purpose."
"Oh…Look – I'm sorry I lied, but I couldn't risk you trying to stop me or wanting to come with me. I had no choice but to lie."
"And that's why I'm mad!" said Penny abruptly. "I don't care that you lied. Well-no, that's not true, but what I mean is – I'm mad about why you lied." Madison just stared at her, dumbfounded.
"See – you don't get it, even now!" Penny let out an exasperated gasp and twirled around on her heels. "We are in a relationship!" she said through tight lips, turning back to face Madison so swiftly, that she backed away a couple of steps. "Don't you understand what that means? We are supposed to care for one another, help each other and be a freaking team!" She was half-yelling now, her face full of indignation. Closing her eyes momentarily, to remain calm and block out Pennys anger, Madison answered softly "I do understand that. That was me caring for you. I was scared for you, that's why I didn't tell you."
"And what about what I wanted? What about me caring for you? But you don't think about that do you!" Penny sighed heavily and rubbed her temples before looking at Madison again. She continued in a much calmer voice.

“You treat me like a hobby Madison. You don’t trust me with what’s really important, you don’t tell me things. You keep me at arms length so you would have something to return to when you are done with whatever danger or crisis you are dealing with.”
Cold, bitter hurt blazed inside Madison, making her feel both hot and freezing at the same time.
“How can you say that?” she demanded “I know I’m not the most outgoing person around, but I tried, I really did. I have never been closer to anyone else. I share everything with you, I-“
“Except your mothers letter!” interjected Penny bitterly.
“I was trying to keep you safe!” roared Madison, her anger now rivaling Pennys. “You might have gotten hurt or-“
“Like you did you mean?” pointed Penny taking a step towards Madison. “You did get hurt, am I not allowed to be angry about that?”
“It was my brother that did the hurting” yelled Madison. “Besides, Madam Pomfrey-“
“You’re lucky to be alive!” shouted Penny, shoving a finger at Madisons chest. “Madam Pomfrey had to give you Mutatio mixture. Do you even know what that’s used for? It’s for countering the expiro spell that causes your organs to stop working.”
Madison gaped at Penny. She hadn’t had a clue about the potion. Trusting Madam Pomfrey, she had gulped down every vial that was handed to her without questions. She shook her head - what did it matter, she healed. Whatever spell Jacob had used, it wasn’t important anymore.
“But I’m fine now. Everything is alright. Jacob is gone, my mother is gone – it’s over.”
“Yes, it is over. And you came back to me, but for how long? What if something else comes up? Some new curse or danger. Will you go off on your own again and leave me in the dark? Will you do that every time something serious happens? Am I your girlfriend only when everything is sunshine and rainbows?” Penny stopped abruptly and sighed. She looked deflated and miserable.
“What do you want from me? I did what I thought was best for you and our friends and I would do it again” charged Madison with conviction.
“I want you to open up to me, for you to see me as someone you can lean on for support, not only as someone who you need to protect.” Pennys eyes started to shine with unshed tears and her voice wavered a little.
“I didn’t want to tell you any of this, you were so happy after that night and…I thought that I would get over this and everything would be alright.”
“But you didn’t” supplied Madison gravely.

“No, I guess I didn’t” agreed Penny looking at the forest in the distance. “I think I need some time alone.”
A loud ringing noise started in Madisons ears and it seemed like the earth had disappeared from under her feet.
“What do you mean time?” she asked hoarsely.
“Just time…to think.”
Silence fell around them, Madisons mouth was dry and her mind blank. Just when she forced her mouth to open, to say something, anything – Penny kissed her on the cheek and walked away swiftly, clutching her bag against her chest as she went.
Gaping after her, Madison stood rooted on the spot. In less than half an hour, everything had changed.
The expiro spell had been nothing, compared to this feeling she now had in her heart, she thought.

“Go and talk to her!”
“No.”
“Stop being so stubborn.”
“She said she needed time. I don’t think two days qualifies as enough time.”
“But the holidays are starting tomorrow!”
“Yeah? So?” Madison shoved her hands deeper into her pockets and made a sharp turn around a suit of armor. The complete shock of her fight with Penny had morphed into resentment and bitterness. She found that when she was angry, she felt more detached and a little less like someone had removed all the oxygen around her. So she chose to be angry, at least for the time being.
Rowan didn’t give up so easily however and took a few quicker steps to catch up with her.
“I’m sure she didn’t mean for the two of you to spend the entire summer holiday apart.”
“How do you know? Maybe that’s exactly what she wants. Can we please change the subject?” said Madison exasperatedly. Rowans shoulders slumped and with a small huffing noise, she remained silent. They walked on aimlessly through the corridors. Cheerful sounds of students laughing and joking could be heard all around. The exams were over, the holidays were coming and summer had arrived. Everyone were packing or making the most of the free time they had. Prefects and teachers alike had dropped all pretense of order and the air was thick with fanged frisbees, Dr Filibusters fireworks and – curiously – boomstinks.
“These things have really caught on” mused Rowan when she was forced yet again to hug the wall to avoid another boomerang that whooshed passed her head.

“Yeah, I bet Tonks is pleased” said Madison impassively.
“Have you thought about your plans at all? I mean for the summer?” asked Rowan distractedly.
Madison swallowed the huge lump in her throat that had been present there for the past two days.
“Not much no. What about you?”
“Oh I’ll spend most of it at home. There’s a lot to do and I’ve missed the farm so much that I don’t really want to go anywhere else.”
Rowan threw a quick side-a-long glance at Madison.
“You do know that you are welcome anytime? You could come with me straight from Kings Cross if you wanted. My mom wrote to me specifically to remind you.”
Madison slowed her walk and smiled warmly at Rowan. “Thank you! And thank your mother as well. But I think I need to visit my parents house to set things in order and come up with some sort of a plan.”
Rowan shrugged “I get it. But really – anytime, alright?”
Madison stopped and pulled Rowan into a hug “Thanks. It means a lot.”
Rowan pulled back from the hug and examined Madison with a knowing look “You should really talk to her before leaving.” Madison didn’t say anything, but shoved her hands back to her pockets and ducked to avoid another boomstink that zoomed over them, leaving behind a distinct odor of dung.

Chapter 52

Madison was crossing the courtyard on her way to the broomshed. She had planned to spend her last night at Hogwarts flying over the lake. She longed for the quiet calm that usually washed over her when she was in the air. Tulip and Rowan were great and they didn't ask her about Penny, in fact they avoided the subject as much as they could, but Madison desperately needed to be alone with her thoughts. It was exhausting to force herself to keep talking and act involved instead of curling into a ball on her bed like she actually felt like doing.
To her surprise, the broomshed wasn't empty.
"Steward! You're here late?" Skye jumped, looking alarmed, polishing gear lying scattered all around her.
"Hey. Sorry, didn't mean to scare you. Why are you here?" asked Madison, just as surprised.
"Just finishing up. Didn't want to pack this beauty away without one last scrub." Skye patted her broom lovingly. "And you? Practicing at this hour?"
"Just going for one last flight before holidays."
"Right…" Skye smiled at Madison and started to pack away her equipment. "Brooding over your break-up huh?"
Madison froze in front of the broom rack and blinked a couple of times. "What?"
"Your break-up with Haywood? Need some alone time?" Skye asked, heaving her bag over her shoulder. Madison stared at her wide-eyed. She wanted to say, that she hadn't broken up with Penny, but the words were stuck in her brain. Had Penny broken up with her? Was this what she had meant when she said she needed time? Had she really been so dense as to not realize it before?
"Well don't brood too long. Best thing to do when you fall off a broom is to get right back on" Skye smiled at her and reached for the door. "Besides – there's plenty of plimpies in the lake." Wiggling her eyebrows, she left, leaving Madison standing stock-still in the middle of the dimming shed.

"My mother wrote that they bought some Siberian birch plants."
"Hmm."
"We are going to see how they compare with the Central European species."
"Cool."
"They're supposedly excellent for non-verbal magic."
"Great."
"I heard that Filch is going to marry Mrs. Norris this summer."

“Hmhm.”
“And Peaves is performing the ceremony.”
“That’s nice.”
“Madison!”
“What? Why are you yelling?” Startled, Madison finally looked up at Rowan and saw that she was staring at her with an exasperated look on her face.
“Just go and find her. I bet she’s in the prefects compartment.”
Madison slumped back and turned her gaze out the window.
“You’re impossible! The both of you are acting like idiots, I swear” huffed Rowan. “Are you really going to let one fight come between you?”
“It’s not the fight” mumbled Madison into her hoodie.
“Well what then? Do you want to break up with her?” asked Rowan pointedly.
“No!” replied Madison immediately and after a small pause added in a softer tone “But I think maybe she does.”
“No way! Just go and apologize, you’ll make up in no time. She’s pining after you just as much, I promise.”
“I don’t know what to do” said Madison quietly.
“What do you mean? You don’t know what to say? That’s easy-”
“No. I mean, I don’t know how to change. How to make it better.”
Madison sagged even lower in her seat and watched the card with Circes face on it from Rowans chocolate frog rattle slowly around the table with the repetitive rumble of the train.
“Oh…You mean you don’t know how to…tell her things?”
Madison sighed, she really didn’t want to talk about Penny. Every time she closed her eyes, her face rose in her mind and she felt like her heart was caving in on itself. But looking up, she saw Rowans sympathetic eyes and swallowed the lump in her throat.
“That’s the thing – I thought I was already doing it. I thought…I thought I’d gotten better. It’s not like I’m not telling her things on purpose all the time…I just wanted to keep her safe.”
“Well that’s the thing” said Rowan gently. “She wants to be a part of your life – all of it. Even the not-so-safe parts.”
“I wanted to protect her. It’s not her fault that my life up to now has been so…weird.”
“It doesn’t matter to her. How do you think she feels when you leave like you did?”
“How?” asked Madison fearfully.
“My guess is – useless. And maybe a little expendable.” Seeing the look on Madisons face, Rowan raised her hand reassuringly and continued. “I know it’s not what you feel, or what you meant to happen, but…” Rowan gave a small shrug “It’s what she’s probably

feeling."
Madison pulled her knees against her chest and leaned her head against the cool glass of the train window.
"Maybe Skye was right" she said quietly, watching the blur of green trees fly past her.
"What do you mean, what did she say?"
"She said that we had broken up." Saying the words out loud caused Madisons jaw to tighten and a cold void opened in her chest.
"Pshh!" Rowan rolled her eyes dramatically. "She has no idea what she's talking about." She eyed Madison sternly for a while in silence. "You're really not going to talk with her?"
"If I make her feel like you said I do, maybe it's better I don't."
"Aargh!" Rowans head dropped on the table between them in frustration. "But you miss her!" she said looking up again.
Madison took a breath and ran her hands over her face, trying to muster herself. "Yes, I do. But first I need to figure out how to fix it, how to be better. For her."
Rowan regarded her inquiringly and looked like she was about to say something else, but Madison interjected quickly "So are you going to plant the birches with your mother?"
Rowan tilted her head and gazed at Madison. Her eyes were so understanding and full of compassion, that Madison had to double her efforts to keep her face neutral. After a long pause Rowan said with a sigh "No, they planted them already. April is the best time to do it. But we are going to try and start shaping them to get the best branches growing."
Madison let out a breath of gratitude and gave Rowan a small smile "Sounds fun."

Standing in the middle of her parents bedroom, Madison breathed deeply. It felt strange to be there, like she was visiting a house on the market, left vacant by its former occupants. The room even looked like a hotel room, there was nothing to show that someone lived there. The bed was covered with an expensive silk duvet, all creases smoothed out. There were no personal items or everyday knick-knacks on the cupboards. If she hadn't known better, she might have thought that her mother had packed everything before leaving. But although she could count on one hand the times she had been in that room when she was a child, she remembered it always being like this. In fact, the whole house felt artificial somehow, like it was furnished to resemble a comfortable home, but someone had stopped before finishing. Walking from room to room, Madison searched for some nostalgia, something to take with her, but with every door she opened, the urge to leave only grew stronger. This house meant

nothing to her, her childhood didn't bring up any wistful memories she wanted to hold on to. Turning towards her old room, she walked briskly to her closet and selected a few items she threw into her backpack. She was almost out the door, when she turned back and opened a drawer in her desk. A thick book with golden letters on the cover – the Steward family album. Madison browsed through it and tore out two photos, shoving them into her back pocket.

It had been a long day. Madison stretched her arms above her head and stared at the ceiling of her room in the Leaky Cauldron. It was weird to think that she had left Hogwarts only the same morning. She had walked out of Kings Cross in a hurry, trying to avoid running into Mark or Philomena and at the same time jumping every time she glimpsed a blonde haired student in the crowd. She didn't fully know if she longed to see Penny at the station or feared it, probably both. In the end, the nagging voice in her head, that sounded a lot like Skye, had won out and she bolted through the brick wall into the bustle of the city. Going from London to her parents house and back again hadn't in hindsight been the best use of her time, but she was glad she had done it. She couldn't imagine staying in that house a moment longer, not even for a single night.
The sun woke Madison up the next morning. She had forgotten to draw the curtains on her window the night before. She didn't rise from the bed at once, opting to lay under the fluffy blanket, pondering her outlooks. She felt the need to have a strategy, something concrete to hold on to. Minutes ticked by in silence, disturbed only by the occasional shuffle of feet outside her door. Finally Madison threw the blanket off of her and got up. Knowing what to do made her feel better, she could take this one step at a time. Heading towards the bathroom, she was almost excited – she could do this, all she needed was a plan to follow. She would go to Diagon Alley, visit the ministry, buy some muggle newspapers and then come back and write a letter to Penny. What exactly she was going to write wasn't yet clear to her, but she pushed this complication further back in her mind. First things first, at least she had a plan.

When dusk was falling, Madison felt that she had at least made some progress. She had gone to Gringotts and made a sizable withdrawal from her vault, which was looking much more crammed than the last time she had been there. The gold from her family vault must have been added to her own since then. Though she didn't dare ask the exact sum in it from the grumpy looking goblins, she could discern, that the amount could last her a lifetime if she was careful.
Her next stop was the Ministry of Magic. She felt a little shaken entering the giant atrium on her own, memories of her last visit still

fresh on her mind. Squaring her shoulders and breathing deeply, she trotted up to the front desk and asked to see Manuela Logg – the witch who had handled her case according to the documents she got from professor McGonagall.
Manuela Logg turned out to be a gray haired elderly woman, who offered Madison butter cookies before she had time to sit down. After spending almost an hour in her cubicle, they managed to draw up the paperwork to sell Madisons parents house and arrange ministry officials from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement to review the house before putting it on the muggle-market. To Madisons dismay, she discovered that she couldn't rent an apartment on her own in the muggle world before reaching the age of eighteen. However, Manuela agreed to send an agent from the ministry to conclude the transaction if and when Madison found a suitable location. All in all, it was an effective meeting and Madison thanked the kindly woman profusely. She sent her on her way with many assurances and pockets bulging with cookies.
The other half of her day was spent trouncing around London, visiting flats for rent. She managed to check out five different offers, before she found one that she liked. There was a small one bedroom apartment above a pub called Fox on the Green, next to a tiny park. It was a bit cramped, but furnished and clean. Madison had liked the view from the window and the feel of the place when she looked around.
When she finally returned to her room at the Leaky Cauldron, she fell into her bed. Convincing herself, that she would get up in a moment, she listened to the muffled sounds from the bar downstairs and drifted off into a dreamless sleep.

Madison hunched up her knees and gazed out of the window, still getting used to the view from her apartment. She had moved into her new place three days ago. The ministry officials Mrs. Logg had set her up with, had confunded her landlord and helped her sign the lease. So her new independent life began – above a small pub in inner London. She absolutely loved the flat. It was small, but had several little nooks with shelves for books, a tiny kitchen with an island separating it from the living room and best of all – it was hers! She had never lived on her own before, although it had felt like she did when she was staying at her parents house. This felt different somehow, the rooms had a snug feel to them, completely opposite of her family home.
She was starting to develop a new routine as well. In the mornings, she went for a run at the park next to her flat and usually ate breakfast at the pub downstairs. She had gotten a haircut that she desperately needed and applied for a card at the nearest library.

Everything was going according to her plan. Except the one thing that kept her awake at nights.
On her knees lay a crumpled piece of parchment, full of scribblings, some of the lines crossed out. Trying to compose a letter that she would deem appropriate to send to Penny had proven to be an unfeasible task. It was not that she had nothing to say, the many unfinished drafts on her floor and table verified, that actually the opposite was true. She just couldn't find the right words. Doubt and fear had started to seep into her mind since she had talked to Skye and the looming prospect, that her letter would be irrelevant and belated, crippled every coherent sentence she tried to form. Cursing inwardly at her own cowardice and indecisiveness, she threw the draft on the floor next to its companions. She was well aware that every passing day only increased her anxiety and cemented her fears. Rowan had been right, she should have gone to Penny while they were still both at Hogwarts. At least she would have known for sure if she had broken up with her. She tried to imagine the conversation in her mind and knew immediately why she had chosen not to go – it was easier not knowing. In some ways, the uncertainty offered a glimmer of hope that Madison tried to hold on to. She flopped on her bed and rubbed her forehead trying in vain to clear her mind and get her focus back. She missed Penny so much that it hurt. She missed talking to her, holding her, kissing her and even simply looking at her. Sighing deeply, she turned on her side and looked at the small snowglobe on her bedside. The miniature Penny dancing inside it laughed and twirled around, blowing a kiss to Madison.
Incessant tapping noises intruded into Madisons thoughts of Penny and she opened her eyes begrudgingly. There was a small brown owl outside her window staring straight at her with large round eyes. Madison got up quickly and opened the window. The owl hopped unto the desk and stuck out her leg somewhat impatiently. Feeling puzzled, she untied the parchment that was attached to the birds leg who flew out the window immediately after being freed from her burden. Madison had no idea who would write to her. It was far too early for the yearly letter from Hogwarts to arrive and she hadn't had time to let her friends know about her new home yet. She unfolded the parchment and stood near the window to read it under the light coming from the streetlamp outside.
"Dear Miss Steward, We regret to inform you of the death of Silver Steward. Mr. Steward passed away the day before yesterday in his cell at Azkaban prison, apparently as the result of a heart-attack. Please contact us at your earliest convenience at Wizengamot Administration Services, level 2 of the Ministry of Magic (Whitehall, London) to discuss funeral arrangements. We offer you our condolences. Yours sincerely, Fidelia Nox"

Chapter 53

Madison sat on her bed, clutching the letter from the ministry in her hand. She stared at it for a while, rereading the words on it again. Looking up, she suddenly realized, that the window was still open. She got up and went to close it. The street was almost empty, a jogger was passing by and a couple, holding hands, had just stepped out from the pub downstairs. She could hear them laughing before they crossed the street and turned the corner. A cool nights breeze wafted over her face and she left the window open, turning around. She looked across the room – she felt like she should be doing something. Her father had died, she should be crying, shouldn't she? Feeling confused, she sat on the bed again and read the letter once more. She had to go to the ministry, there was a funeral to arrange. A small wave of panic hit her, she knew nothing about funerals. How did they even work? She would have to invite people didn't she? But who should she invite? She knew next to nothing about her fathers personal life. Had he even had any friends? The League of Seven? Suddenly a laugh burst out of her and she pressed a hand to cover her mouth in horror. The absurdity of her situation was too much to handle and another snort escaped through her fingers. What about her mother and Jacob? She had no idea how to contact them. Realizing a split second later, that they wouldn't be able to attend the funeral anyway, she shook her head. Silver had died. In Azkaban. Alone. Her hand fell from her mouth and she dropped the letter on the bed. Her father had died in prison. She would never see him again. She sat very still and tried to ingrain the truth to her brain, to make her realize it fully. It seemed like a story someone else was telling her, something foreign and far away, something that she had no part in. She ran her hands over her face and felt the scar on her palm against her cheek. She lowered her hand and studied it. The scar was still red, her battle with Jacob had reopened the wound and it stung a little when she flexed her fingers too wide. This was her fathers doing, the scar would be a part of her body for ever. Strangely, she felt no anger towards Silver when she looked at the jagged red line running across her palm. All of a sudden she remembered something and jumped off the bed in a hurry. Throwing things out of her backpack, she found what she was looking for – two photographs she had taken from her parents house. She straightened them out and sat on the bed again. One of the photos was of her and Jacob. It was the last one taken of them together, Madison was ten years old and beamed brightly, holding on to her brothers hand. Jacob looked handsome and confident. He smiled at the camera and ruffled Madisons hair genially. The other photo was of the whole

family. No one was smiling on that one. Cassia and Silver stood behind Jacob and Madison, who were sitting in the front. Jacob was obviously bored, his knee bouncing and Madison stared motionlessly at her shoes. Silver and Cassia looked regal, her mother had the same impassive expression, that she always wore and Silvers chest was puffed out, one of his hands grasping Jacobs shoulder, the other in his pocket. Madison looked at her father closely – he looked younger than she remembered, but had the same air of authority wafting around him, the same coldness. Suddenly feeling very tired, Madison placed the photos on her bedside table and pulled the blanket over her. She kicked the letter from the ministry off of her bed with her toe and pulled the blanket higher. After a couple of minutes of tossing and turning, she got up and reached for the photos again. She walked across the room and shoved the pictures deep into her backpack. Zipping it shut, she tossed the backpack into her closet and climbed back to bed. She would figure out what to do in the morning.
Her bed seemed colder somehow and she pulled the blanket up to her chin, curling in on herself. She tried to think about her father, remember him as he had been during her childhood, but the only thing she felt clearly, was how much she wished that Penny would be lying next to her.

Hours passed, but Madison remained in the harrowing limbo between being awake and sleep. Her mind was blank and she concentrated on her heart thumping fast against her chest. She was just about to resign her attempt at resting and get up, when she saw a flash of light through her eyelids. Jumping up, eyes wide, she saw Fawkes sitting elegantly on the foot of her bed, a small envelope in his beak.
“Fawkes!” gasped Madison and knelt in front of the large bird. Fawkes looked at her with his small black eyes and jumped a little closer.
“Is that from Dumbledore?” whispered Madison holding out her hand to the bird. Fawkes dropped the envelope and stretched his wings. He flew around the room once and landed on Madisons shoulder. She could see his golden claws and felt warmth emanating from the bird. His claws gripped her shoulder gently and with a blinding flash of gold, he was gone again. The warmth he had carried, lingered and Madison felt like someone had hugged her.
She ripped the letter open – as expected, it was from Dumbledore.
“Dear Madison, Please accept my deepest sympathies. I recognize that your relationship with your father was troubled, but knowing you, I am also aware, that this does not diminish the loss for you.
Death is like a stone thrown into a lake – the stone falls out of sight, but the ripples from it last for a long time and move far further than one can see. I want to remind you, that it is perfectly natural for you to grieve for

your father and equally as natural to feel relief. There is no right way to feel on this occasion, the important thing is to let oneself feel in the first place.
As regards to the funeral – I have written to the ministry and together with Mrs. Manuela Logg, whom you have already met, have made some arrangements to ease your burden somewhat. If you have no objections, the funeral will take place tomorrow noon at Woodwells cemetery where your family plot is located. If you prefer a different cemetery or have any other questions about the funeral, please contact Mrs. Logg. If not, then everything has been arranged and you don't have to do anything.
I am very sorry, but I am unable to be in attendance and offer my support in person, but please know, that you are in my thoughts.
My sincere condolences, Albus Dumbledore"
Madison collapsed back on her pillow, the letter in hand. Gratitude and relief made her smile a little, for which she immediately felt guilty for. But when she felt Dumbledores letter in her hand, she reminded herself what he had written and smiled again. The headmasters letter had calmed her down considerably and not only because of the funeral. Almost like Fawkes, the letter felt warm and friendly, giving Madison strength she didn't know she had been missing. She felt that she could finally fall asleep now, but looking around, she saw that the sun was already peeking through her window. With an exhausted grunt, she clambered out of bed and got dressed. Sitting behind her desk, she wrote two letters – one to Mrs. Logg, thanking and reassuring her, that she had no objections in regards to the funeral that was arranged, and one to Dumbledore with a similar message but in a slightly more personal tone. When she was done, she placed the quill on the table and made a move to get up and head downstairs for breakfast. She had to go to Diagon Alley and visit the post-office, then head out to the city to buy something appropriate to wear at the funeral. She remained glued to the chair however, battling with herself silently. She knew it was unfair, it felt utterly selfish, but she couldn't imagine being alone at her fathers funeral. She missed Penny so much, that she felt like she would burst. Even if Penny had already left Madison and considered them broken up, she would still come if Madison asked her, of that she was sure. Penny would never leave her alone on such a day if she knew. But was it fair of her to ask? Was she even allowed to anymore? Groaning slightly, Madisons eyes fell on the many half-finished letters to Penny lying scattered on the table. If she came, then at least Madison had a chance to talk with her, face to face. She would at least see her again and that was what she wanted more than anything. Hurriedly, before her boldness could dissolve, she pulled a fresh parchment.

Madison was sweating. The sun was scorching and the air stood still in a midday lull. It was the perfect summer day – every bench she passed on her way to the cemetery entrance had someone sitting on it, kids were rolling past on their bicycles and the sidewalk was full of people walking leisurely, chatting with one another.
She was overdressed, but didn't want to remove the black blazer she had gotten the day before. Swiping her hands into her pants in an effort to dry them, she walked through the large stone gates of the cemetery. Her heart was in her throat and a persistent humming noise resounded in her ears. She had no idea what made her more nervous – the actual funeral, or seeing Penny again. The weird feeling of intense longing conflicting with the drop of terror in her stomach, made her queasy and fidgety. She shoved her hands into her pockets, despite the heat and stomped determinedly forward.
There were only about a dozen people standing around her family plot when she arrived. The first thing she noticed was that Penny was not there. Scanning the faces around her, she realized with a jolt, that she didn't recognize any of them. Most of the witches and wizards were in robes, although some did wear muggle clothing. A beautiful tall blonde woman wearing a short black dress walked over to Madison, who unwittingly backed away a few steps.
„My condolences" she said quietly when she reached her.
„Thank you" murmured Madison and tried very hard to remember if she had ever met the woman before. There was something familiar about her, although she couldn't figure out exactly what.
It seemed that the strange woman had cleared the way for others and to her dismay, Madison discovered, that she was now the center of attention. Slowly, in a quiet progression, all the witches and wizards came over to her and exchanged polite remarks and offered their sympathies. She kept on nodding and thanking them, quietly pondering the irony of her being the representative of the Steward clan. When the church bells rang, a small tufty-haired wizard coughed politely and stood in front of the large tombstone, which now marked Silvers birth and death dates alongside Madisons grandparents. Everyone gathered in a semi-circle around the wizard and fell silent. He started talking in a soft, soothing tone. Madison marveled briefly at his ability to talk so elegantly about life and death, without mentioning Silver once. She supposed it was necessary, considering his end in Azkaban. In a matter of minutes, her attention drifted from the wizard and she started to discreetly look around for signs of Penny. As minutes ticked by, Madisons heart sank. She looked at the people around her, with their solemn faces and dignified postures and started to breath a little quicker. It dawned on her how alone she was. There, under the bright summer sun, surrounded by strangers, she

realized that she was burying her father. Her father, who had done almost everything in his power to erase the connection between them, but who despite it all, had still given her life. To her complete surprise, Madison felt a painful lump rise in her throat. She clenched her hands into fists and blinked, breathing hard, trying to suppress the emotion and remain passive.
„Let's take a walk" The tall blonde woman whispered into her ear. Madison narrowed her eyes and looked at the woman suspiciously. She wanted to decline, but felt her heart beating rapidly and her throat tighten. Realizing, that she needed to get away, she nodded curtly and turned, taking long strides towards the clump of trees she had passed earlier.
„Are you ok?" Madison hadn't even seen the woman follow her. She was hunched over, holding herself standing with the help of the elm tree. Hot flashes and chills ran through her bones intermittently and she was shaking.
„I'm fine, thank you" she wheezed out, wanting nothing more than to be alone.
„You're not. I think you're having a panic attack." Madison started to walk away, but drooped back against the tree, feeling her legs wobble under her.
„Here, sit down and smell this." The woman pushed her firmly on the ground and handed her a small bottle.
„Who are you?" croaked Madison weakly.
„I'll explain in a moment, inhale it. It will help, I promise." Madison sniffed the bottle carefully, it smelled like lavender. The label on the vial said *Eau de Lavande*, which meant nothing to Madison. She inhaled the scent again and hung her head between her knees, gasping for air.
"Are you going to be sick?" Madison heard the sincere concern in the strangers voice and tried to look up at her. Feeling all air leave her lungs, she only managed to shake her head and continued to stare at the ground.
"Just try to breathe. It will pass soon." She felt the womans hand, drawing soothing circles slowly on her back. "Smell it again. It will help." Madison did as she was told, all of her willpower spent on trying to stop hyperventilating and none left to question the strangers motives. Very slowly, her breaths seemed to be coming a little easier and her vision started to clear. She ran her tongue over her dry lips and raised her head.
"Feeling better?" The blonde was sitting on her knees next to her, still running her hand in a rhythmic motion over her back. Madison straightened herself a little and scooted further away from the woman.
"Yes. Who are you?" she asked tersely.

She smiled and dropped her hand. “It’s me – Grace. Grace Harpis. You healed me, remember?” When Madison only stared at her in disbelief and moved even further against the tree, she chuckled. “I’m undercover. Polyjuice potion. But I understand that you need more proof. Ask me anything only I would know.” Madisons head was swimming in confusion. Was this some kind of an intricate plot of Jacobs? Or her mothers? What the hell was going on?
“What was the first spell you cast after I-”
“Lumos” interjected the woman calmly. Madison eyed her suspiciously.
“What is the name of your friend who called us?”
“Proudfoot. He’s here incidentally. In disguise as well of course.” Grace gestured vaguely towards the gravesite.
“Where did we meet the second time?”
“At your girlfriends house. The Haywoods. Where is she by the way?” Ignoring her last question, Madison, finally convinced, blurted in awe “Grace?”
She smiled “You’d make a good auror Madison, being really paranoid is a good quality to have in that profession.”
“What are you doing here?” exclaimed Madison, still very much confused.
“Just observing. Me and Proudfoot were assigned to track the remaining members of the League of Seven and being that Silver was a prominent member...” When she saw the shocked expression on Madisons face, she continued hastily “They’re not active anymore. As far as we can tell, the League dissolved after your brother, I mean Jacob...eehh...well you know.” She looked a little embarrassed having brought up Jacobs name. “It’s just that the former members of the League are mostly shady characters overall. Some of them are involved in far worse affairs than the League. The aurors office thought it necessary to keep an eye on their goings on. And well – here we are.” Madison felt lightheaded, her heart was beating slower and she could breathe again, but this new sleight of information made her distinctly feel the past two sleepless nights. She rubbed her hands over her eyes, feeling very tired.
“What was it that I inhaled?” she asked.
“Just my perfume. I read somewhere that it helps to smell something when you have anxiety. I’ve been carrying this bottle with me since my first day as an auror, just in case.”
“Well...thank you for your help, but if you’re on duty, I don’t want to keep you.”
“You’re not going back?” Grace asked.
“No” Madison simply stated.
Grace looked at her curiously for a moment. “Do you want to go and

have a drink? You look like you need it."
Madison surveyed her "Don't you have to work?"
"The ceremony is almost over and Proudfoot's there. It's fine" she answered casually, already wiping the grassblades off of her dress.
Madison was exhausted, but thinking about returning to her empty flat made her cringe.
"Ok, lead the way."

They sat down at the nearest pub they could find. It was small and a little dingy, but completely empty of other patrons. Grace had ducked into an alley on their way there and looked like herself again, the polyjuice potion had worn off.
"So how've you been?" asked Grace when she returned from the bar.
Madison quirked an eyebrow at her and let out a low laugh.
"Ok, stupid question, my bad" said Grace smiling. "Here – I hope you like scotch, it was the only decent thing on the menu."
Madison eyed the glass in front of her "I'm underage."
Grace rolled her eyes at her and tapped her wrist. Turning her gaze towards the barman, Madison saw that he carried a dazed expression as he was wiping the glass in his hands and stared out the window blankly.
"You confunded him?" Grace only nodded, sipping her own drink delicately.
"Ok, thanks. I guess" Madison raised her glass and took a sizable gulp. The liquid burned her throat as it flowed down, but it carried a warmth with itself, that Madison welcomed.
"I'm sorry about your father" said Grace softly, watching Madison carefully. She only shrugged in response and took another swig of scotch.
"So, how's aurors life treating you?" asked Madison in an effort to change the topic.
"Same ol' same ol'" replied Grace, taking the hint. "I'm still learning the ropes. Proudfoots been great, his sort of mentoring me now."
"Is the League of Seven giving you trouble?" asked Madison.
"Not really. We mostly just track them and keep an account of their whereabouts. But it's quite exciting, we get to do a lot of undercover work and that's my speciality." Grace grinned a little proudly.
"Proudfoot says that I should have been an actress, I have a knack for impersonating different characters."
Madison smiled "Sounds like you enjoy it."
"Oh, I do. What about you, given any thought about your future? You only have one more year left don't you?"
"Yeah. I haven't really" Madison swirled the liquid in her glass pensively. "Thought about it much I mean. I like history..."

“Really? Wow! I would have thought you’d go for something more active for sure, given your...” Grace didn’t finish her thought and looked at Madison apologetically.
“I think I’ve had enough action to last me a lifetime” chuckled Madison morosely.
“Sorry. I didn’t think...” said Grace, her cheeks reddening slightly.
“No, it’s ok. I just...I never chose to have that kind of life you know? It all just happened.”
“I get it” nodded Grace pensively. She picked up her glass and spun it around in her hands, not looking at Madison.
“You know – in St.Mungos, when I woke up, your eyes were the first thing I saw and I remember thinking that I’d never seen such dark eyes filled with so much light.” She raised her eyes and looked at Madison cautiously. “I think you wouldn’t be the kind of person you are if you didn’t have that kind of life, you know?”
Madison pondered her words for a while and shrugged “Maybe. But that’s true about everyone, isn’t it?”
Grace raised her eyebrows and took a sip of her drink “I suppose.” After a brief silence, she smiled brightly and asked in a lighter tone “What about the jealous blonde who kept giving me the death-stare all evening? Penny? Where is she?” Madisons only response was to take another mouthful from her glass.
Grace grimaced “Wow. I can’t stop putting my foot in my mouth today, can I? Sorry.”
Madison smiled sadly “Nothing to apologize for. She’s at home for all I know.” She took another swig and emptied her glass “She didn’t come” she added as an afterthought. Grace fell silent and looked deep in thought for a moment.
“Why not?”
Madison frowned a little at the question. She had no wish to dissect her private life with anyone, much less someone she hardly knew.
“We had a fight” she replied shortly.
“Are you not together anymore?” asked Grace.
“I have no idea” answered Madison wearily.
Grace narrowed her eyes at her and spoke briskly “Well why don’t you find out?”
Madison gaped at her, surprised that someone could be so intrusive. But Graces eyes shone only with innocent kindness and Madison sighed. “I invited her to the funeral. She didn’t come. What more can I do?”
“Pffff! Don’t be a dunce Madison! Go and talk to her of course. Invited her to the funeral – honestly!”
Madison straightened in her seat, what misgivings she had about talking about her personal life pushed aside. “You think? But what if

she doesn't want me to?"
Grace rolled her eyes and scoffed so loudly, that even the confunded barman turned to look at them.
"With the way she was looking at you? Please – if looks could kill, I'd have dropped dead on the Haywoods living room floor. Besides – what have you got to lose? At least you'd know for sure."
Madison blinked, her heart started racing a little quicker again. Maybe Grace was right – what did she have to lose? She could not face going back to her apartment alone. The uncertainty was weighing on her like a ton of bricks. She had to see Penny, not seeing or talking to her for so long made her ache in a way that no potion could mend. She stood abruptly, almost knocking over her empty glass.
"You're right! I...I should go! Thank you for the drink. And before, at the funeral...thank you!"
Grace looked a little taken aback by her sudden departure, but took it in stride. Raising her glass, she winked "Don't mention it. And good luck!" Madison sent a grateful smile over her shoulder, already running out of the bar. Bursting onto the lively street, she squinted at the bright sunlight and smiled.

Chapter 54

Her black blazer flapped in the breeze and Madison felt the gust of wind run over her back and under her shirt. She closed her eyes and inhaled the familiar scent of the ocean and listened to the sound of waves crashing against the shore. She supposed, that she could never be near an ocean without inherently thinking of Penny again. The thought made her smile as she opened her eyes. She hadn't returned to her flat, instead she hailed the Knight Bus from the closest alley she could find near the bar where Grace had taken her. Spotting the familiar house in the distance, she started crossing the moor slowly. She tried to think of what to say when she finally saw Penny, but nothing appropriate or suitable came to mind. All she knew for sure was, that she needed to see her and hold her, hoping that the words would find her when the time came.

She walked through the garden, which had grown significantly more luscious since her last visit, and stood at the front door. She could hear her own heartbeat and the wind chimes clinking softly behind her. Taking a huge breath, she knocked. The house remained silent. She knocked again, a little more forcefully this time. Her only response was a lonely seagull screeching in the distance. She stood for several minutes motionlessly at the Haywoods porch, staring at the unhelpfully closed door. She felt like an idiot – why had she assumed that the Haywoods would be home? They could be anywhere. It was the summer holidays after all. Surely Philomena and Mark had days off as well, they might have gone on a family vacation together, like they did at Christmas. Just to be sure, Madison walked around the house and peered over the back garden. It was empty as well and she dragged herself back to the front door. Flopping down on the staircase, she rested her head on her knees. She had been so excited – terrified – but mostly high with the anticipation of talking to Penny after almost two weeks. Exhaustion settled over her, she hadn't really slept for days. Fighting the urge to lay down on the Haywoods stairs, she drew herself up and trudged back towards the ocean.

When she had put enough distance between herself and the house, she sagged down in the sand. There was no hurry to get back home, she would be as alone there as she was sitting on the beach. Her last strength depleted, she stared passively at the horizon. She had managed to ruin it after all. The best thing that had ever happened to her. And she had done it all on her own. She could place no blame on Jacob, her family, or the vaults. She herself was the reason Penny had left. She was weak, her father had been right about that. Too scared to open up, too frightened to take a chance. Trying to cling to the one

good thing she had, hiding it, like a child hides her favorite toy, and eventually losing it in the process. She had missed so many opportunities at being better, at acting like a normal human being. And what had she done? Every time, without fail, she had run – like a coward, trying to isolate herself and remove any and all chances of getting hurt. Madison wanted to cry, the release might have eased her despondency a little, but she was too tired. The day that was behind her, had been the worst one she had ever had, and she had some to choose from, she reflected wryly.

When she finally closed the door after her, she felt so worn, that she was even a little surprised that she had made it home at all. The day had lasted a lifetime and she could not believe that only this morning, she had been at her fathers funeral. She pulled off her socks and removed her blazer, which was now distinctly crinkled, throwing them on the chair. Not bothering with the rest of her clothes, she slumped, face first on the bed.
She had no idea if she had slept for hours or if only minutes had passed, when she heard someone knocking at the door. She half-opened her eyes and lifted her head. The sound came again. She pushed herself off the bed with a grunt and stumbled towards the entry. As a last minute paranoid thought, she grabbed her wand from the kitchen table and opened the door.
The world around her seemed to halt, even her breathing ceased. In the dim light of the corridor, stood Penny. They stared at each other for a split second, before Penny stepped closer, pulling her into an embrace.
“I heard about your father. I’m so sorry!” she said into her ear. Madison couldn’t move, she didn’t even hug Penny back, still clutching her wand in one hand and holding on to the doorknob with the other. Penny pulled away from the hug and looked at her.
“How are you?” she asked, worry evident in her eyes. Madisons head was spinning, the shock of seeing Penny at her door had rendered her effectively mute. How was she here? Was she still sleeping and was this a dream? As that thought went through her mind, she looked back at her bed, almost expecting to see her own sleeping form on it. When she turned back to Penny, she realized, that she hadn’t answered her yet. Penny was looking at her expectantly, the frown on her face deepening with each passing moment.
“I…” Madison started. She had no idea what to say. “I…” Her voice sounded gruff and foreign to her own ears. “Come in” she said instead, although Penny was already technically inside. She closed the door and continued to stare. Penny stepped further inside and threw a quick glance over her shoulder at the apartment.

“Madison?” she asked tentatively. Still not knowing what to say, Madison opted for movement. She walked back towards her bed and gazed around aimlessly. Picking up one of her socks that had fallen off the chair, she repeated dazedly “Come in”. Her brain felt like it had given up completely, terminating all functions. Every movement she made, felt redundant and no useful words came to mind. Penny walked towards her cautiously “How are you?” she asked again. It was a maddening question, thought Madison. How was she? She had no idea how she was.
“Tired” she finally replied and immediately winced hearing herself. Why had she said that of all things? Was she really so dysfunctional, that she couldn’t even say what she was thinking? Penny seemed to accept the answer however and ebbed a little closer.
“I’m really sorry I wasn’t at the funeral” she said gently. Madison just continued to stare at her with bleary eyes. It had been so long til she had seen her. The faint smell of lilacs floated in the room and she could see her own reflection in the blue eyes that were looking back at her anxiously. Penny shuffled her feet on the floor, looking apprehensive.
“How was it? I mean...h-how did it go?”
Madison opened and closed her mouth for several times. It was an actual question, she could not just keep staring in silence. Willing her brain to jump-start, she tried to find an appropriate thing for reply. How had it been? She thought back at the funeral, marveling once again, how little time had passed and tested several answers in her mind. Ok? Fine? Great? Normal? Had it been normal? Was burying your parent ever normal? She didn’t know anymore. Madison looked at Penny and opened her mouth again to say something, anything. Instead – she started crying. Silver dying, the funeral, the past two days. And now – Penny – here in her apartment. She simply could not hold on to the words she wanted to say. Tears came easier than words at that moment and so she cried. Covering her eyes with one hand, she dropped the wand from the other, and gripped the chair for support. She heard a faint “Oh” from Pennys direction and felt arms wrapping around her instantly. It only made her sob even harder. She tried to stop and wipe her face clean, but found that she couldn’t. It seemed like her brain had switched off all functions other than “*cry!* ”. She wasn’t even sure what she was crying about. She was just so tired and the tears running from her eyes felt like a dam breaking free. Penny tugged her gently towards the bed and they sat down. Madison didn’t resist when Penny, without saying anything, pushed them both onto the pillows, draping her arms around her again. The position reminded her the last time Penny had held her like this. It had been at the hospital wing, after she had gotten out of the last vault. The vault

where her father had tried to sacrifice her for Jacob. Her delusional, imperious father, who spent his last days alone with no one but dementors with him and who now lay underground, his precious family honor in shatters. Her father, whose last words to her daughter were a confirmation that she had been his biggest mistake.
The smell of lilacs was stronger now and Madison pressed herself closer to Penny, crying harder than she ever had in her life.

Madison woke with a throbbing headache. Squinting, she looked around and discovered herself half on top of Penny. She was still sleeping, fully clothed, one of her arms under Madison. As quietly as possible, moving only an inch at a time, Madison slid off the bed. Sighing deeply, she ran her hands over her face and through her hair. She stood and looked at Penny – her braids were a little frazzled and her blouse had wrinkles on it, but she looked as beautiful as ever. Madison covered Penny gently with her discarded blazer, since the blanket was stuck under her and walked to the bathroom. Standing under the cold shower, she tried to take stock of herself. Her body felt sluggish and stiff, but sleep had eased some of her tension and the cold water was clearing away her headache. It felt good to wash off the remnants of the previous day. Another kind of stress swelled in her instead. Penny was there, on her bed, just a few feet away. She finally had the chance to tell her how much she meant to her and how much she had missed her. She could try and explain that she had never wanted to hurt her. She could try and make this right. If only she could get the right words out. A sudden thought occurred to her – maybe Penny had woken and left already while she was standing in the shower like an idiot? She scrambled quickly out of the small cubicle, slipping slightly on the tiles and dried herself hastily. Hands still fumbling with her t-shirt, she pushed the bathroom door open. Her bed was empty and Madison sank against the wall, disappointment washing over her.
“Good morning!”
Turning so quickly that she thought she might have gotten whiplash, she saw Penny – standing in her kitchen, holding her coffee press.
“I thought I’d make coffee. Is that ok?”
Madison was so relieved that she was still there, that she didn’t answer immediately. Heaving a massive breath, she shut the bathroom door with her foot. With a sudden startle, she discovered, that her t-shirt was bunched over her stomach and pulled it down in a swift motion. When Penny raised her eyebrows at her, she realized that she was still waiting on an answer.
“Yes! Of course! Great!” she blurted. Rolling her eyes at her own awkwardness, she was at the same time a little pleased, that she had

managed to produce words at all. She pulled on a pair of jeans from her closet and walked to the kitchen. Penny handed her a steaming cup of coffee and poured one for herself.
“Thank you” muttered Madison, still unsure if her brain would cooperate with the forming of words. Penny was looking nervous as well and fiddled with her spoon.
“Are you feeling a bit better?” she asked hopefully.
“Yes. Thanks...” Madison flushed at the reference to the previous night. She hadn’t meant to fall apart so completely, but had been unable to stop herself either.
Silence thundered around them and Pennys eyes were hesitantly flickering between the window and her hands. Setting down her cup, Madison heaved a massive breath and opened her mouth.
“I’m sorry I wasn’t at the funeral” blurted Penny before Madison could get a word out. “We were running around like crazy trying to make it, but my mother didn’t want to risk apparition with so many of us and it took us ages to get to the ministry. And then we had to find this Logg person and she had gone to lunch! My father actually swore. I’ve never heard him swear before. When we finally reached the cemetery, the funeral had already ended.”
Madison blinked in utter confusion. Nothing Penny had said, made sense to her.
“Wh-why did you- What do you mean so many of you?”
“My father and Beatrice” replied Penny as if it had been obvious.
“Why did you go to the ministry?” asked Madison frowning.
“To get the address for the funeral” said Penny, looking equally confused now.
“But-but” stuttered Madison “Didn’t I say where it was in my letter?” she asked, trying to remember what exactly she had written two days prior.
“What letter?” asked Penny, also frowning.
Madison shook her head, something didn’t add up. “My letter. Didn’t you get it?”
Penny was shaking her head slowly, eyes widening “No. When did you write to me?”
“The day before yesterday, the morning after I got the letter from the ministry. Wait – how did you even know about the funeral if you didn’t get my letter?”
“My mother” answered Penny “We’ve been in London this past week and she ran into one of her old colleagues and heard the news. When she came back to the Leaky Cauldron and told me, we decided to come find you. But when we reached your parents house, it was empty. We didn’t know you moved. So we waited there for a while. Finally we went to the ministry.”

“So you never got my letter” said Madison slowly, warmth spreading inside her at the knowledge that Penny hadn’t intentionally ignored her invite.
“No” said Penny again “What did you write?” she asked quietly.
“I asked you to come. To the funeral I mean” replied Madison, her eyes firmly planted on the kitchen table. Penny reached for her hand and held it gently.
“I’m sorry” she said earnestly.
Madison shook her head “No, don’t apologize. It’s not your fault.” She gulped “It means a lot…that you tried to come…even without my letter.”
Penny almost smiled “It means a lot that you asked me to come.” Her hand was warm and Madison looked at their fingers entangled together on the table.
“I missed you” she said, still looking at the table.
“I missed you too” replied Penny earnestly, emphasizing her words with a squeeze of her hand. Madison looked up at Pennys face. She was real and warm, standing in her kitchen, holding her hand.
“I’m sorry!” whispered Madison, her quiet words somehow still ringing loudly. “I’ve been a complete jerk. I’ve acted like a moron. I should have told you about the letter from my mother right away and even before that, I should have told you everything, always. I didn’t mean to hurt you, it just happened. I was scared and afraid…of…of losing you. I know it’s not an excuse. I should have talked to you before leaving Hogwarts or at Kings Cross at least, and said all the things I wanted to say, instead of running off like I always do. I was a nitwit, I’m sorry. But I was afraid that you didn’t want to see me and I would only make things worse if I pushed at the wrong time. I thought that I could come up with some sort of a solution, a plan or something, so that I could make it right again. And I tried, I really did, but I couldn’t find the right way and then the letter from the ministry came and then you weren’t at the funeral and your house was empty. When you-”
“Madison! Madison – wait. My house?” interrupted Penny.
“Oh right – I went to your house yesterday after the funeral” explained Madison.
“You did?” asked Penny softly.
“Yes, well I didn’t know you lot were in London” answered Madison offhandedly. “Never mind that, what I meant to say is…” she paused for a moment, taking a breath, trying to slow down the deluge of words suddenly bubbling out of her. “I though I was protecting you, but I wasn’t. Not really, I was protecting myself. I was selfish. And a coward. I thought if I kept you away from that part of my life, I could keep you to myself. But I was wrong. Not only because I didn’t realize

that my family with all of their burdens are a part of my life – and a part of me – but also because I didn't realize that I needed you to be a part of that too. All of it, all of me." Madison kept her eyes on Penny as she held tightly on to her hand, still entangled with her own. "I understand that now. I was an idiot and I'm so sorry! You were never a hobby Penny! I swear! You were – are – the most important part of me...I just never really knew how to...how to..." Madison broke her gaze away from Penny, running her hand nervously through her hair. "I didn't know how to be…with you" she finished lamely, her voice drifting off at the end of her sentence.

What started as a whisper, had grown in volume as she spoke and silence echoed loudly after she stopped. She could feel her own heart thumping fast, the tension in the room palpable. She wanted to look at Penny, but was terrified of finding anger, or worse – apathy in her eyes, and so she kept her head down.

"I think I owe you an apology as well." Penny spoke softly, but even still, Madisons breath hitched at her words as if she had yelled.

"I shouldn't have acted the way I did. I was frustrated and impatient. I didn't understand why you were so convinced that you would scare me off. And on some level...I think I was jealous." When Madison raised her head in confusion, Penny frowned and waved her hand in the air "I don't mean it like that – I know you haven't...I mean I wasn't jealous because of someone specifically. I just...I wanted you all to myself – all of you. And whatever I did, or said and as much as I cared for you, you had these invisible defenses around you that I couldn't break down. They were like walls that separated us and I felt like I was perpetually standing behind them, knocking out one brick at a time to get closer to you."

Madisons head dropped again and she squeezed her jaw shut – she had done enough crying in front of Penny.

"I was stupid and stubborn. I didn't want to be the first one to apologize, but then...Well I sulked around the better part of last week until my mother finally sat me down and asked me what was going on. And when I told her, she helped me see, how stupid I was being. You were right when you said, that you had tried to open up more, you really had! But I was too selfish and irritated to realize that then. I expected something from you that you had struggled with all of your life, without trying to give you time or...I don't know...help you I guess?" Penny paused for a moment and Madison looked up. Penny was looking out the window, evidently trying to find her next words. Madison kept looking at her, a tiny sliver of confidence returning. Penny turned her head back and smiled when her eyes met Madisons. "But even without my mothers rather forceful intervention, I knew that I had to come find you – I missed you like crazy and everything

around me seemed so pointless all of a sudden. I felt wrong all the time! Like something was missing or broken." She smiled more widely and placed her other hand on top of their already entangled ones on the table.
"Something Rowan said to me at Kings Cross kept echoing in my mind. I knew in my heart that it was true. Everything I know about you, everything you have shown me during the past year and even before, proves that it's true. And I thought about that more than anything else...and I think it's true about me as well."
"What did Rowan say?" asked Madison, her voice sounding hoarse and low. Penny smiled again, her eyes shining in the light coming from the window.
"She said that when you love, you don't stop."

Chapter 55: Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The slight gust of wind from the sea did nothing to ease the blaze from the sun that hit Madisons face when she descended down the steps of the Knight Bus. She squinted against the light and looked around. The village was in full bloom, flowers grew on every windowsill she passed and people were sitting lazily on their doorsteps, enjoying the weather. Contrary to the stifling heat and swelter of London, the suns efforts were clearly much more appreciated here. She heaved her backpack over her shoulder and made her way slowly through the narrow streets. Soon, the Haywoods large house came to view across the moor.
“Madison! You’re here!” Beatrice sprinted towards her, hands full of shells from the beach. She dropped them when she threw her arms around Madisons middle.
“You’ve grown” marked Madison smiling. The younger Haywood beamed back at her.
“I know! Soon I’ll be taller than Penny.” Letting go of her, she stooped and picked up her collection. “What took you so long? We’ve been waiting for ever.”
“I was only one day longer than planned. I wrote, didn’t Penny say?”
“I know, I know. Filling papers and signing deeds and all that other boring stuff. At least you’re here now. Are you ready for Ireland? I’ve packed already. Have you? Did you know that the irish wizards used to predict the future by killing animals and looking at their guts – eww!”
Madison chuckled “There was a little more to that. The derwydds also predicted the future by observing the flight of birds and the lunar cycle as well as nature in general. It was much more complicated than staring at guts you know.”
“You sound like my dad” sighed Beatrice. “He keeps shoving old books under my nose during dinnertime, going on about the spring equinox and oak trees. Thank Merlin you’re here, maybe he will leave me alone now. Come on, let’s tell the others you’ve arrived.”
They moved along towards the house. Beatrice kept zigzagging around Madison, picking up interesting looking shells and stones from the ground, chattering about her plans for their trip to Ireland. When they entered the garden, Mark emerged from the house in overalls, carrying a bucket.

“Madison!” His face broke out in a huge smile and in two long strides, he met them, pulling Madison into a tight hug.
“You made it. How did it go? Got everything in order?”
“Yes. Everything went fine. The house is sold” answered Madison returning the hug. “You’re gardening?”
“Yes, I thought I should make at least some sort of an effort, especially when we are leaving for two weeks tomorrow.”
“Let me drop my bag inside, I’ll come and help you.”
“Oh nonsense, go on and rest, you’ve been busy. I can manage just fine. I’m familiar with these little buggers already” he said, eyeing the bouncing bulbs to his left with affection. “Penny is in her room upstairs packing” he added with a wink. “When you come down for dinner, remind me to show you the first edition of Yeats I bought last month. It has the ‘Hosting of Sidhe’ in it I thought you might enjoy.”
“The *aes sidhe* !” exclaimed Madison in excitement. Beatrice looked at her in disbelief. “It’s about fairies” explained Madison when they climbed the stairs. When Beatrice kept looking at her with scepticism, she added a little stubbornly “It’s interesting, I swear.”
“For you maybe” scoffed Beatrice loftily.
“Mom! Madisons here!” she shouted when they opened the door. Philomena hugged Madison as tightly as Mark had and looked her over with an appraising gaze.
“Have you been eating right in London? Do you know how to cook or do you eat out? Living by yourself at your age...”
“I never learned how to cook so I go out mostly. But I eat fine, I promise” replied Madison. “How are you?” she asked, changing the subject.
“Fine, fine” answered Philomena airily, still inspecting Madison
“We’re all packed and ready to go. Mark has gone to wrestle with the garden – a fools errand if you ask me – and Pennys just going over her bag upstairs. Dinners in a few hours. We thought we might make it a bit more festive this time, so we’re eating in the backyard. The weather has been so lovely recently, it seemed a sin to waste it.”
“Sounds great! And thank you again for inviting me” said Madison a little awkwardly.
Philomena scoffed “Like we would go without you! Go on now and rest before dinner.” She pushed Madison gently towards the staircase. “And you” she turned to Beatrice “You come with me and help me set the table. Did I tell you about Malahide Castle? I’ve booked a tour for us. It was zip lines.” Philomena smiled at Madison over her shoulder as she shoved an eager looking Beatrice towards the backyard.
Madison had almost reached the top of the stairs, when she heard Philomenas voice.
“Madison? You’re a part of this family now, there is no need to thank

us, get used to it." Smiling at the bluntness of the older witch, she jumped the last remaining steps.
Penny stood with her back to the door, a small suitcase opened in front of her, piles of clothes strewn all over her bed.
"Do you know where my yellow jumper is? I swear Beatrice keeps stealing my clothes" she said without turning around.
Madison dropped her backpack and walked behind Penny. Sliding her arms around her, she said into her ear "Wasn't your yellow jumper the one that we forgot in the room of requirement?"
Penny whirled around "Madison!" She threw her arms around her "You're here!"
"I am" confirmed Madison with a smile.
"How did it go?" asked Penny pulling back a little to look at her face.
"No problems. Just had to sign some stuff and hand over the papers."
"Didn't you want to go back there one last time?" asked Penny carefully.
"No. I didn't leave anything of importance there" answered Madison with a shrug. "Besides – the ministry officials have already gone over the place, you know – made it muggle-friendly in case my parents had some sort of spells or charms in place. It's all good, I'm just glad I'm rid of it." She smiled and placed a small kiss on Pennys cheek. "And that I'm back here."
Penny smirked and pressed herself a little closer.
"Me too, I missed you. Did you see my parents already?"
Madison nodded while placing small kisses on Pennys neck "Hmhm. They both sent me upstairs to rest."
"Are you tired?" asked Penny softly.
"I'm not actually" answered Madison pointedly, nudging Penny gently towards the bed.
"I really should finish packing" said Penny half-heartedly looking at the piles of clothes behind her.
"I can help you with that. I've done so much packing recently, I've become an expert at it. In fact, let me start helping right now."
Madison started to slowly unbutton Pennys blouse.
"How is me being naked going to help with the packing?" asked Penny smiling at Madison.
"Don't question my methods" smirked Madison, placing a small kiss at Pennys lips. "Besides – I happen to believe, that you being naked is always helpful."

The air felt cool on her skin and Madison stretched her legs, letting the blanket slide off of them. The room was bathed in hews of pink and yellow as the morning sun was starting to climb the sky. Penny was breathing slowly, her hair tousled and features relaxed. Madison

lay on her side for a while, in a quiet slumber, looking at the sleeping form of Penny occasionally through her eyelids. Finally, when she felt that sleep had left her completely, she slid out of the bed quietly and pulled on her pyjama bottoms and a top. After a quick visit to the bathroom, she made her way downstairs, yawning widely on the staircase while trying to smooth down her hair.
The sight of Pennys mothers upright back that greeted her, made her smile as she approached the kitchen counter.
“Good morning!”
“Morning!” answered Philomena cheerfully, reaching for a new mug. She poured Madison a fresh cup of coffee and passed it along. They sat in peaceful silence for a while before Philomena spoke.
“I did miss this.”
Madison raised her eyebrow at her while taking a sip.
“This. Us. Here in the early mornings. I know you said it was peaceful here alone, but I think I prefer company.” She smiled warmly at Madison and she smiled back. After another couple of minutes, Madison broke the silence again.
“I know you said not to say thank you, but…This is the last time, I promise. Thank you for letting me stay with you. And for inviting me to come with you to Ireland. And…being so understanding about everything. It means the world to me, I hope you know.” Madison looked at Philomena, trying to convey the enormity of her gratitude with her eyes. “I’m not really good with words, but I hope I’m not too much trouble for you.”
Philomena looked back at her and sighed with a tiny smile.
“Oh child. You are the opposite, I assure you. I suppose it’s only natural that it takes time for you to see yourself as we see you. You are like a gift to our family. You have made all of us better in some ways. I meant what I said yesterday – you are a part of this family. I know it’s not the same kind of family you already have-”
“No it’s not” interjected Madison quietly. “I mean that in a good way” she added hastily.
“Well, families are different. Some are born into theirs, some find them along the way.”
“There are bonds we form with others of our own choosing that might grow to be much more significant – that’s what Dumbledore told me once” said Madison.
“He is right you know. And we chose you Madison” answered Philomena gently, looking at the sea.

Madisons back was sweating under the weight of her backpack. Philomena had arranged a portkey with her connections in the ministry and they were waiting in the backyard for the correct time to

grab hold of an old can of pickles placed in the middle of the lawn. Beatrice was running around them, overcome with excitement, sometimes rushing back into the house to check on her parents. Mark and Philomena were doing a last-minute check-up on the house, closing the windows and locking the doors. Madison held Pennys hand in her own and beamed. She closed her eyes for a moment – this was it – this was undoubtedly the happiest she had ever felt in her life. The feeling wasn't a sudden experience, rather a slow fulfillment – each moment resounding in her like a drip of water. Without opening her eyes, she leaned towards Penny and smiled as she felt their lips meet with ease.
"What are you smiling about? Excited?" asked Penny nuzzling into her cheek.
"Yes" nodded Madison with conviction.
"Well I hope you manage to occasionally glance up from all the books you've taken to actually see Ireland."
"Did I tell you about Irish Eyebright? They supposedly grow in the wild around fairy forts. I read somewhere that the native specimens are quite potent for-"
"For healing potions!" exclaimed Penny "That's right! I didn't think about that" she smiled affectionately "It's a good thing I have my own personal bookworm with me on vacation."
Madison grinned "I have to confess that my knowledge on potion ingredients has been depleted with Irish Eyebright."
"Oh well" sighed Penny in mock disappointment "Maybe you should've spent more time with potions books and less on Shakespeare?"
"What is past is prologue" answered Madison dreamily.
Penny quirked an eyebrow at her "That's a Shakespeare quote isn't it?"
"Maybe" smirked Madison in return.
Penny smiled and kissed her again "You're a doofus. And I love you – so much!"

Chapter End Notes

I want to thank all of you who have taken the time to read this story. A special thanks goes to all who took time to leave a comment. I read them all and they never failed to lift my mood, make me laugh and spur me on. Thank you all and stay safe!

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